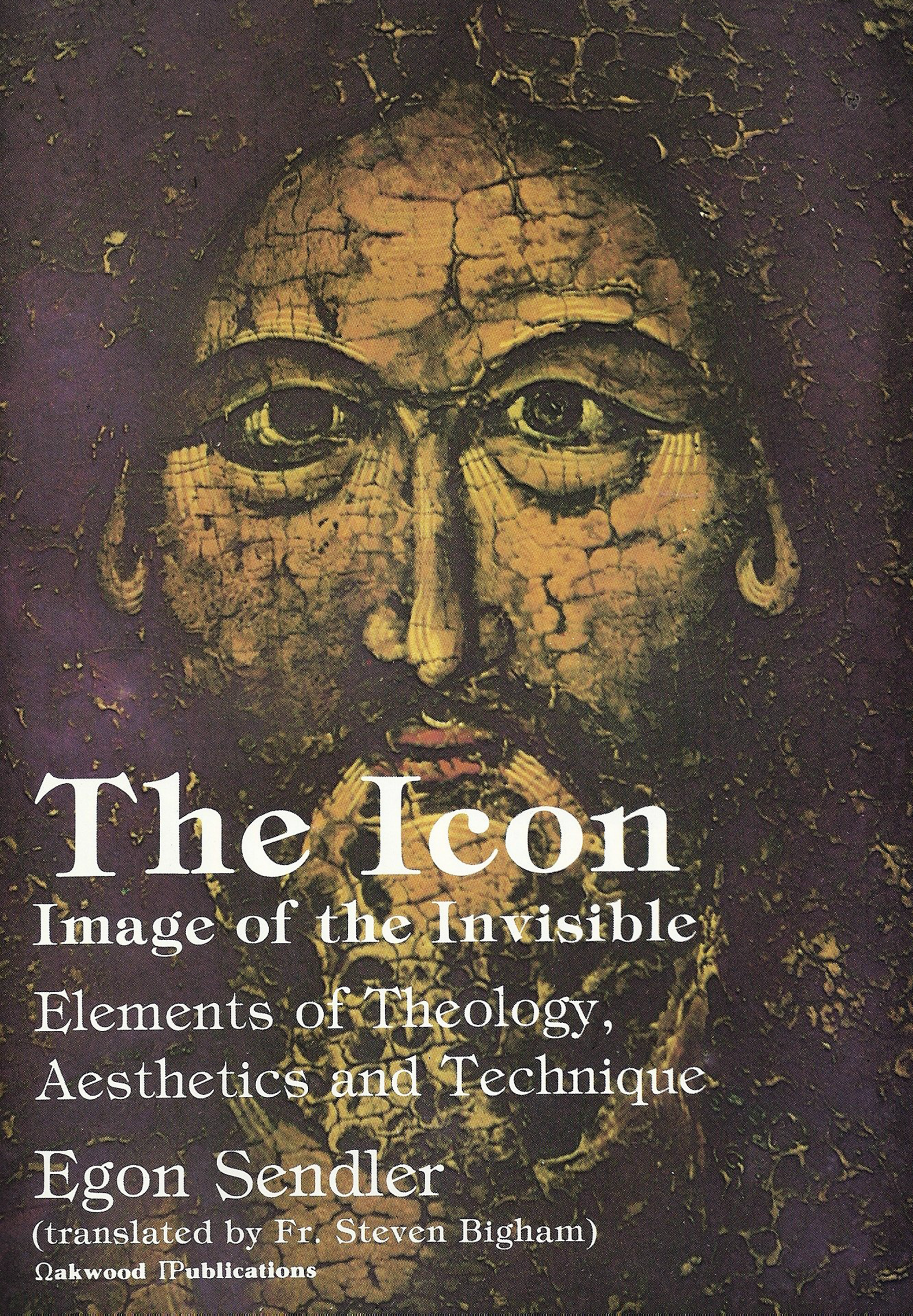

The Icon

Image of the Invisible

Elements of Theology, Aesthetics and Technique

Egon Sendler

(translated by Fr. Steven Bigham)

Oakwood Publications

EGON SENDLER, S.J.
(translated by Fr. Steven Bigham)

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Aesthetics and Technique

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Introduction

Every work of art manifests an organic unity. In the artist's vision, the constituent elements of the work are so intimately knit together that they give birth to a new reality. Two factors give value to the work of art: 1) the richness of the components combined with 2) the rigor of their integration. This holds true for the icon as for every other work of art. The icon, however, introduces another dimension to the image, transcendence, and thus projects itself beyond the forms of our world, making God's world present. The theological, aesthetic, and technical elements come together in this other world where they open themselves up to a new way of seeing things, in faith and meditation. What is more, the icon speaks the language of the Byzantino-Slavic culture and eastern Christian spirituality. In summing up this data, we get a glimpse of the icon's complexity and also the involved problems of its objective interpretation.

We are conscious of the icon's organic unity, and we want to work in the spirit of contemporary research as it touches the field of Byzantine art. We have therefore decided to present the "elements" of iconography, not as the result of an analysis that separates its constituent elements from each other, but as the result of an analysis which distinguishes different aspects of one single religious and artistic phenomenon. Our goal is to express the icon's richness and unity.

When we think about the icon, it is important to keep three dimensions of this one reality in mind: 1) scientific knowledge, 2) artistic value, and 3) theological vision. We close ourselves off from the full meaning of the icon if we ignore any one of these three. By neglecting the theological element, the icon becomes an historical monument or document which transmits valuable information about history or folklore, but as a result it loses its spiritual soul. If we neglect the scientific element, we condemn ourselves to a subjectivity that inhibits our ability to distinguish between what is essential and what is secondary. By failing to make such distinctions, we are in danger of altering the very transcendental truth that the icon is pointing to. To neglect the aesthetic element is obviously to misjudge the icon itself. In admitting that a religious subject requires first and foremost the use of the most advanced artistic techniques and talent in the execution of the work, we do not mean to say that all such works of art are in fact the expression of a culture at its highest point of development. A so-called "primitive" art can also express a very profound idea.

In its soul, the icon is certainly a "religious art"; this expression is perhaps inadequate: we should rather speak of a "theological art." The icon is part of the great stream of Tradition, that is, the interior life of the Church which is the extension of God's incarnation. We see this in the fact that the icon comes out of the beginnings of Christianity and the centuries of persecution; it was enriched by the difficult dogmatic deliberations of the councils; and finally it was purified by the testing of iconoclasm. The icon is indeed intimately linked to the gospel and to the liturgy, and there it finds its very roots.

Thus rooted in the heart of the faith, the icon points to a dimension which goes beyond the natural; it pushes out toward the ineffable. This ascension toward the Beyond is a communion with eternity. According to St. Paul, Christ is the visible "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15); as Greek theologians say, on the other hand, the icon is a "deuterotypos of the prototypos": the reflection of God's reality.

In order to understand the nature of the union which the icon seeks to establish with the reality beyond, we are not at all required to think in "Neo-Platonic" philosophical categories. In fact, for a Christian, the spirit is "incarnate" everywhere; God's Spirit, in particular, is incarnate in words and gestures, in the sacraments which are the source of creative grace for a new reality, for the New Creation. What is more, the basic elements of Byzantine iconography are not, in the final analysis, original. We can in fact find a certain number of them in the medieval art of the West. Finally we note that these constituative or fundamental elements are not always used in the same way by the various schools of Byzantine art. Nonetheless, these elements have given birth to a well defined artistic language which is shared as much by the glorious masterpieces as by the modest shining of the 19th century handicraft icons.

When we speak about artistic language, we do not mean to refer only to principles or abstractions--rules of grammar are not a language--but also to what Schweinfurt called "the Byzantine form." We are dealing with that factor which gives unity to the diverse Byzantine techniques: the icon, the fresco, the mosaic as well as architecture and the minor arts. The work itself, as a work of art, allows us to verify the unity of the artistic language. We properly insist on the concrete work itself so that we can put back together what has been analyzed and distinguished in the pursuit of a clear, intellectual presentation.

Another question must be asked at the beginning of this essay: How can we speak of a Byzantine artistic language without denigrating the particular values of different countries, their histories, their cultures, the richness of their own proper secular artistic forms? We by no means intend to deny these values, but it is impossible today to claim that the art of Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Southern Slavs--an art derived from Byzantine culture--developed independently of the Byzantine source. The economic and social structures of these diverse countries, their common faith, and even their type of creativity show that they remained united in one large family that was able to survive the fall of the Byzantine empire. The unity of the Byzantine world shows itself even more clearly if, for example, we compare romanesque and gothic art in the West with Armenian and Georgian art in the East. This unity, however, did not stop Russian, Serbian, and Bulgarian art from manifesting national characteristics. We can see national traits in widely differing icons even when these icons were painted in the same spirit and according to the same technique.

We cannot therefore avoid the following questions: What were the sources of Byzantine art? What were the ideas and structures that created its artistic language? The elements of a formal aesthetic are certainly important: how a particular aesthetic analyzes linear formes, how it conceives space, or how it chooses and organizes colors. Such elements only partially answer these questions, however. Analysis of the formal elements of an aesthetic only touches the surface of a particular work of art.

In order to answer these questions, not exhaustively or definitively of course, but with some precision and objectivity, we present in this book a three-fold study: 1) a theology of the icon along with its history; 2) an aesthetic of the icon with its structures; and finally 3) a technical description of the steps used in creating an icon. In fact, this book is not intended to be just a theoretical presentation of the icon but also an instructional manual for iconographers and those who want to paint icons.

Many of our contemporaries are attracted to icons; many sense in them a great richness which they would like to be able to understand and appropriate; I have written these pages in order to help them enter into the icon's universe of beauty and faith. The preceding lines are adequate to say that this study does not claim to be more than a guide or an essay intended for those who want to learn what an icon is really all about.

I.

THE GENESIS AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE ICON

"...you saw no shape on that day." (Deut. 4:15) Oh what wisdom on the part of the lawgiver! How can we make an image of the invisible One? How can we represent the features of that which is not like anything else? How can we represent that which has no quantity, no height, no limits? What form are we going to assign to that which is without form? What then do we do with the mystery?

If you understood that the incorporeal One became man for you, then it would be evident that you can make his human image.

Since the invisible One became visible by taking on flesh, you can fashion the image of him whom you saw. Since He who has neither body, nor form nor quantity nor quality, who goes beyond all grandeur by the excellence of his nature, He, being of divine nature, took on the condition of a slave and reduced himself to quantity and to quality by clothing himself in human features. Therefore, paint on wood and present for contemplation Him who desired to become visible. (St. John of Damascus: **On the Divine Images**, P.G. 94, col 1239)

(St. John of Damascus:
"On the Divine Images"
P.G. 94, col. 1239)

Chapter 1

The History Of The Icon

Artistic techniques, as well as certain aesthetic elements, give us a glimpse of the special character of the icon. These factors, however, are only signs of a new conception of the image; they remain on the surface of the representation. In order to have a complete view of this religious phenomenon, the icon, we must plunge deeply into its reality and find answers to the following questions: What is the essence of the icon? What are its roots? What are the principles which have determined its evolution?

The goal of this chapter is not to trace the history of the icon in detail or to write a treatise on its theology but rather to facilitate the understanding of its development and of the associated ideas which surfaced in the Eastern Church; this understanding will allow us to recognize the icon's essence as objectively as possible and without polemic.

This understanding is necessary, even, because by knowing the phenomenon "icon," we can understand its content, its themes: veneration, liturgical role, and even various styles.

We therefore propose to look at the icon, its history, and its theology from the point of view of a religious aesthetic.

The Origins of the Icon

The Image among the first Christians

Early Christian art was not born and did not develop in a vacuum. It is an external manifestation of a new spirit as well as the result of an evolution which took place as the regional cultures of the ancient world came into contact. Christianity met these cultures on its historical path, and by incorporating some of their elements, it plotted its own course along the road to self-realization: in Palestine, it encountered Judaism, in Greece and in the lands of the Near East, Hellenism with its oriental variants, and in Italy, the Roman spirit with its own conception of the image.

The Image in Judaism

We generally think that Judaism's negative attitude toward the image has always been absolute. This attitude is based on the prohibition of the Torah: "You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth." (Exodus 20:4) Exodus 20:23 and Deuteronomy 27:15 seem to limit this interdiction to the representation of gods, that is idols.

In fact, all figurative representations were not prohibited, as we see in the episode of the bronze serpent (Numbers 21:4-9) and especially the ordinances concerning the cherubim on the ark: "For the two ends of this throne of mercy, you are to make two golden cherubs; you are to make them of beaten gold." (Exodus 25:18) These ordinances were used again when Salomon built the temple (I Kings 6:23). Likewise Ezekiel spoke of palm trees as ornaments in the temple, in addition to the cherubim with men's and lions' faces (Ezekiel 40:16, 31 and 41:18).

We often hear that the prohibition against images was aimed at protecting the people of Israel from the danger of idolatry, but it must have had another, additional meaning -a positive theological meaning which we discover in the light of the New Testament. Human nature, and with it all of creation, is separated from the Creator; the image of God in man is thus mutilated. In this state of separation, the image has a broken relation with the Creator; it expresses a false reality and becomes an idol. The cherubim, on the other hand, are not affected by this separation which has its source in sin; they are spirits faithful to God and thus can present themselves as protectors on top of the ark of the covenant.

The systematic rejection of all images was established at the time of the Maccabees when Judaism felt itself threatened by Hellenism: Jewish synagogues and graves show a strict observance of the ancient prohibition. Only pure ornamentation was used; all figured images were excluded. This attitude had its political overtones as well, and it helped defend the national culture against the Romans who themselves sensed the tension images were provoking and made concessions. The authorities thus removed from the temple in Jerusalem the shields on which the emperor's name was written; they also agreed to go around and not through the city with their legions since these troops carried the emperor's image on their standards. This strict tendency was never to disappear, but it sometimes produced violent reactions even up until the Middle Ages, and it certainly influenced Islam in the 6th century.

Nonetheless, the Jewish world showed a certain tolerance toward images. Even in Israel, archaeologists have discovered a synagogue of the 6th century at Beth Alpha which was decorated with mosaics of the ark of the covenant, the signs of the zodiac, the sacrifice of Isaac, etc. The Jews of the diaspora found themselves in a cultural environment very favorable toward the image, and their attitude was thus more conciliatory. The most famous example of this art is the synagogue of Dura-Europos in Mesopotamia (3rd century) where we are struck by the richly developed themes. Whole cycles are represented: the stories of Moses, Elijah, Daniel, and other Biblical persons. The observer has the impression that this art is a precursor of Byzantine art.

The Image Among the Greeks

For the pagan Greeks, the image possessed a mystical, even magical, character. Their images no doubt originated in the most ancient oriental cults with their rites, sometimes cruel, which survived in the people's subconsciousness. Any mortal who dared to look at the gods was struck blind or went mad, but it seems that certain representations of the gods were reputed to have the same power. Several statues, like those of Athena and Artemis of Ephesus, were said to be "not made with human hands" and to have fallen from heaven. People venerated these images through rites of ablution and unction, decorated them with flowers, and even served them meals.

Philosophers such as Xenophanes of Colophon, Heraclites of Ephesus, and Empedocles of Agrigentum, saw in this cultic activity a danger for the spiritual character of the divine and protested against the excesses of these rites. Their protests, however, were only listened to by the cultured classes; since the people could not rise to such spiritual heights, and so feeling abandoned by this type of imageless religion, they sank into superstition. From his point of view, Plato (XI, 931 a) also saw the danger in such popular veneration, but he felt that cultured men ought to participate in the rites in order to obtain the gods' favor and to please men since the simple people needed visible representations of the divine.

This analysis of the influence of ancient art seems rather negative from the theoretical point of view, but our evaluation must not appear to hide another very concrete aspect of the case. In reality, it seems quite improbable that the numerous and diverse sorts of pagan images did not have some influence--conscious or unconscious--on Christian art and iconography. Might it not be possible then, that the head of Medusa was taken as one of the possible models for the icon? It is all the more probable that Christians used pagan models since the various "renaissances" that Byzantium experienced had a decisive influence on the development of Christian art. Each return to ancient art left a mark on a civilisation that eagerly turned to its pagan past for its artistic inspiration; this inspiration it then tried to transpose into a Christian mode. (1)

The Role of the Image in the Roman Empire

Right from the beginning, the primitive Church was in contact with Roman culture in which images played a special role. At the beginning of recorded history, the Roman religion probably did not have images. It was under the influence of Greek culture that Rome developed religious art, an art that was always to remain dependent on the older Greek culture. What is more, in the Hellenistic East, the portraits of the rulers were worshiped as cult objects, and this Hellenistic tradition was no doubt at the base of the worship accorded to the Roman emperors. Even though Augustus and his successor still refused to be honored as gods, Caligula made such worship legally binding.

In the Roman world, however, the image was not limited to the religious realm, but it also fulfilled a judicial function. This point needs to be made clear because it was characteristic of Old Rome as well as of New Rome, Constantinople. Under certain circumstances, the emperor's image took his place and became a legal substitute, a vicarious presence of the emperor himself. Thus in court, if the emperor's portrait was present, the judge could sovereignly decide a case as Caesar himself would, had he been present in person. Similarly, a city gave its keys to the emperor as a sign of submission to him, but if he were prevented from being there in person, the keys could be given to another person but in the presence of the emperor's image. The submission was thus considered legal.

This efficacious presence of the emperor in his portrait was related to Roman law. Some people believe that after the conversion of the empire to Christianity, this notion of vicarious, operative presence, which had a judicial function, was joined to the religious tradition of the imperial cult and was transformed. It thus acquired a new sacralization which was to have an influence on Christian images. This prehistory of icons is important if we want to understand the role of icons in the Byzantine world, and even the theory behind them. (2)

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1. André Grabar, *Early Christian Art*, Odyssey Press, New York, 1968; Kostas Papaioannou, *La peinture byzantine et russe*, Rencontre, Lausanne, 1965.

2. André Grabar, *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin*, Belles Lettres, Paris, 1936.

In a recent study (3), André Grabar showed how the Christians assimilated the pagan imagery of their time for their own use. The philosopher became Christ, an apostle, or a prophet; scenes of apotheosis were transformed into representations of the Ascension; and the Good Shepherd had its origin in the pastoral imagery of the era. Starting with the Peace of the Church, Christian art came under the influence of court ceremony: the emperor or empress on the throne became Christ or the Virgin between the angels or saints; the offering of gifts became the adoration of the Wise Men; the Adventus or triumphal entry of the emperor became the entry of Christ into Jerusalem. Portrait art also found its models in pagan art: instead of representing the saints in their individual traits, Christian art produced types and explained their function. Pagan imagery thus served as a matrix for Christian imagery.

The First Christians and the Image

It is not difficult to understand how the first Christians might have found themselves at odds with their pagan environment precisely because of the important role that images played in it. Coming from Palestine as they did, these first Christians must have considered the image to be a form of idolatry, and on the basis of the spiritual character of their religion, they must have also considered any represention of God in art to be a return to paganism. The conflict between their faith and the deified political power thus manifested itself in a refusal to worship the emperor: it is ironic that the martyrs of the first three centuries were to be condemned before these very emperors efficaciously present in their images.

There were other reasons, however, which explain why religious art seemed to have no importance in the primitive Church. Being made up of small communities of faithful, the Church did not need large buildings. Such communities, often consisting of poor people, were not able to order works of art from artists who were well paid by their pagan patrons. In addition, the persecutions only left them short periods of time during which they could regroup their forces after heavy loses. Furthermore, the artists who worked for pagan patrons could not be hired by Christians without being required to break with the pagan world, thus losing their livelihood. Tertullian, after 150 A.D., charged these artists with sin if people prostrated themselves in front of their images. There was only one solution open to pagan artists who wanted to become Christian; they had to change professions.

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3. Andre Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1980.

Hippolytus likewise stated, after 160 A.D., that "if anyone is a sculptor or painter, let him know that he must not make idols, and if he does not correct his activities, let him be expelled."

The pagan image itself, its function, and the theory which supported it were too divergent from the spirit of Christianity for such images to become vehicles for expressing the Christian faith, at least without some radical changes. This is what we see in the art of the catacombs.

The Art of the Catacombs

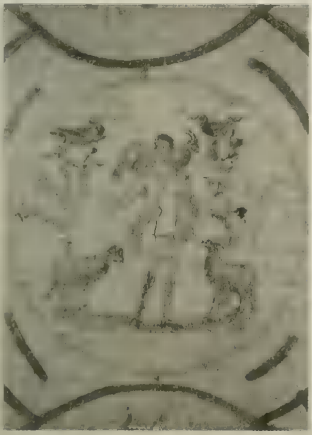
The art of the catacombs appeared in a period in which the arts in general were undergoing a profound change. The classicism of the Antonine era, which sought above all to portray the forms and volume of the human body, gave way to an expressionism that had its sources in popular, and not monumental, art.

It was precisely this style which was most suitable to the various Christian liturgical centers, "churches," of the period, that is, small rooms in private homes and in the catacombs. The new style also permitted the transformation of the ancient symbols so as to give them a specifically Christian meaning.

At first, the Christians adopted purely pagan symbols but gave them a deeper significance. For pagans of the time, the seasons were a sign of life beyond death; for Christians, they became a symbol of resurrection. The garden, the palm tree, the dove, and the peacock brought to mind the heavenly paradise. A ship became the Church, instead of symbolizing prosperity or a happy journey through life; the arrival of a ship in port no longer meant death but eternal peace. Even erotic symbols like Eros and Psyche received a new interpretation at Christian hands: they became vehicles for symbolizing the hunger of the soul and the love of God revealed by Jesus Christ.

The symbols of pagan origin were not simply decorations, but they reflected the teachings about the truth of the Christian faith; they led the faithful to a deeper understanding of the gospel without exposing its mysteries to outsiders. Thus the Good Shepherd was represented as Hermes, the symbol of "humanitas" (see plate 2), and Jonah asleep under the vine leaves recalled the sleeping Endymion. The representation of Moses bringing forth the water from the rock had its origin in a scene of Mithridates. The orant, a person with hands raised in prayer, had already become the symbol of the "pietas romana."

Another category of symbols used by the early Christians got its inspiration from the Old Testament. (Adam and Eve, Daniel in the lions' den, Jonah, the three young men in the furnace) It is surprising that these symbols were more important than those of the New Testament; but despite the recent discoveries of a Jewish iconography at Dura-Europos, it is difficult to say whether we are dealing with borrowings from Judaism or a parallel Christian evolution. The early Christians used the symbols of their time, and when they were in need of new ones, they simply created them. Thus at the end of the 2nd century, symbols of a typically Christian inspiration began to appear: the multiplication of the loaves as a representation of the eucharistic banquet, the adoration of the Wise Men as a symbol of the pagan submission to the Christian faith, the resurrection of Lazarus. Above all we have the secret symbols which, though incomprehensible to pagans, fit in well with the principle of secrecy enforced by the Christians: the vine, as the mystery of God's life in the baptized Christians and, the most important, the fish symbol.


The Good Shepherd.

For the Jews, the fish had been a symbol of messianic food and, as an acrostic, became a symbol of Christ: each letter of the word "i/ch/th/u/s," Biblical Greek for "fish," referred to Christ: Jesus/Christ/of God/Son/Savior. From the 2nd century on, this symbol was very widely used; we find it on sarcophagi, on the sides of tombs, on the walls of the catacombs as well as on small objects.

This formula may have reflected a primitive form of prayer; its exact explanation, however, did not appear in literature until the 4th century.

The catacomb paintings show a surprising unity of style and subjects. We find the same symbols everywhere: from Asia Minor to Spain, from North Africa to Italy. This was the case even though there is no indication that the Church established any official artistic program. (4) As St. Clement of Alexandria indicated in the *Instructor*, the Church simply excluded uncontrolled initiatives. The faith of the Church could be expressed with all the popular spontaneity possible, but this faith remained one, due to the many contacts between the local Churches.

Excluding minor exceptions, Christian paintings presented the same characteristics up to the time of Constantine: in their execution, the images manifested a great simplicity of means, a few strokes in a restricted range of col-

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4. Leonid Ouspensky, *Essai sur la théologie de l'icône dans l'Eglise orthodoxe*, Edition de l'exarchat patriarcal russe en Europe occidentale, Paris, 1960. On page 94, Ouspensky speaks of a "tight control"over artistic work. The relative liberty of the artists to invent new themes and the fact that their style and expression remained within the framework of non-Christian art show that there was not yet an orientation, that is a clear purpose to which artistic means were subordinated. This work has been re-edited by Cerf, Paris, 1980. The first half of this work appeared in English as *Theology of the Icon*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, N.Y., 1978.

ors; a few touches of white were sufficient to express what was essential, with great sobriety. This conscious search for the spiritual world was clearly separated from the naturalist aesthetic of the time. This Christian search was apparent in the faces painted according to the style of mummy portraiture found at Fayum: the large open eyes of the faces went beyond the symbol; they became communion with the kingdom; from them the light of the kingdom shone on the observer.

The faces in the catacombs, however, were not images used in any liturgical action; they were not venerated as portraits of Christ or the Virgin and therefore remained a symbol. (5) In addition, the sacred Christian image could not go beyond this limit because the Church had not yet defined the dimensions of the mystery of the incarnation as it was to do at the time of the first councils.

The Art of the Constantinian Church

With the arrival of Constantine and the Peace of the Church, the conversion of the emperors and the influx of new Christians, we see the beginning of an aesthetic vision that was to shape the art of the following centuries. At Rome as well as in Constantinople, Christian art received a new and different content as the power of the Christian "basileus" was exalted: this art became a reflection of divine omnipotence. As conversions increased among the upper classes, new aesthetic demands made themselves felt; as a result, buildings were constructed under the patronage of this new Christian aristocracy, thus necessitating an adaptation of the Christian aesthetic vision. Throughout the whole empire, the majority of artists worked only for the glory of the new faith. We see therefore the creation of a new program of types and images. Though Christ had formerly been represented as a bearded philosopher, he now became a young, shaven hero with soft features. Christ was no longer a doctor but the master sitting on his throne; the apostles and saints gathered around him ready to receive the law with their hands covered in the manner of the imperial court ceremony.

If at the beginning of the 4th century, Christian art adopted the forms of imperial art, toward the end of the century the movement was reversed. Favored by its position between East and West, and by the political and economic power of the new Christian empire, Constantinople became the center around which a new art crystallized. Christian by

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5. The fact that we can consider several faces to be portraits of the dead persons is rather exceptional.

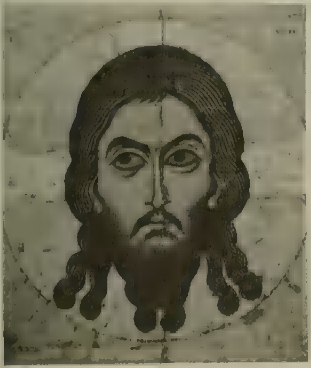
its essence and Hellenistic and oriental by its roots, this new art has received the name "Byzantine". In this capital city, the influences of the ancient world came together to form an artistic language of rare logical consistency and homogeneity. During a process that was to last two centuries, until Justinian, the sacred image sought and found its definitive form. From the Hellenistic world, from Alexandria and the Greek cities, Christian sacred art received harmony, measure, rhythm, and grace, but it refused the idealistic forms that were devoid of truth and grandeur. From the East, Jerusalem and Antioch, the image received frontality, realistic, even portrait, features, but without adopting the sometimes heavy naturalism associated with oriental art. From this time on, Christ was to be represented with long hair, a beard, and dark eyes. The veil worn by women which covered their hair and fell to the knees (as on the icons of the Virgin) originated in oriental civilization. Oriental influence was perhaps even greater in Byzantine architecture and sculpture where it gave birth to many new forms. By integrating so many diverse elements, Christian art became a perfect instrument for the expression of the fullness of the faith; it both unified and sanctified the diversity of cultures.

Thus throughout these centuries, sacred art found a richness of themes and forms, but what is more, it found its place in the life of the Church. It became the expression of the truths of the faith and the reflection of the Church's prayer. Let us note that up to this point, Byzantine art did not essentially differ from the sacred art of the West. Both the East and the West still formed the great Christian commonwealth.

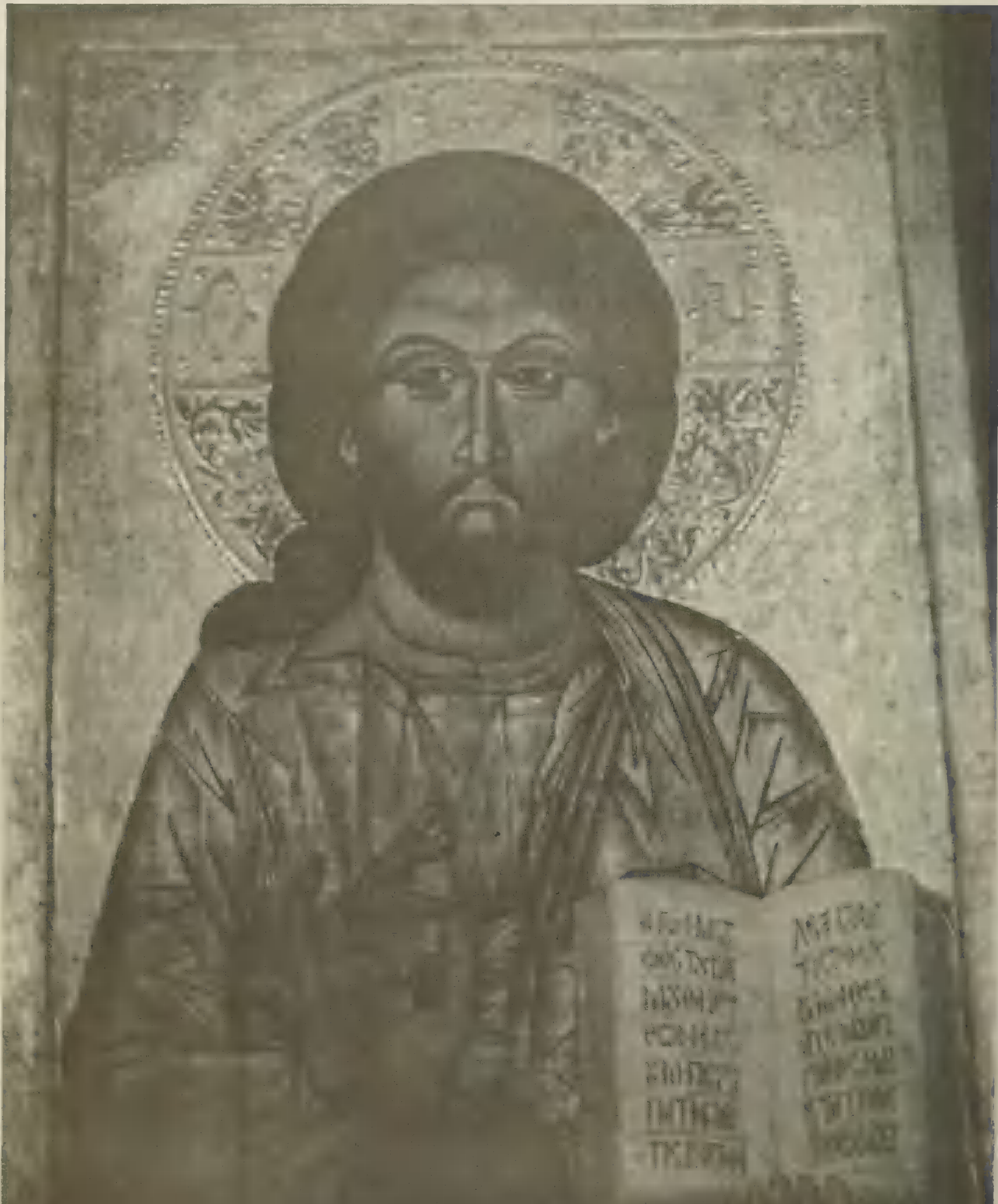
In order to understand the specific character of the sacred image in Byzantium, that is of the icon, we must not underestimate an historical element which is closely tied to the conversion of Constantine: before the battle of Milvan Bridge, Constantine saw a flaming cross with these accompanying words: "In this sign, conquer" (*In hoc signo vinces*). During the night, Christ appeared to him holding in his hand the same image that Constantine had seen in the sky. Christ ordered him to put this image on a standard which was to precede the army into battle. This standard was the "labarum" that lead Constantine into victory.

This notion of an efficacious symbol had already been attached to the image of the Roman emperors: in the emperor's image, he himself was present along with his power.

Starting with Constantine, we find these labarums, with the image of Christ and his vicar the emperor, represented on ivories and medals. In the 7th century, we even find the image of Christ 'not made with human hands' (*acheiropoietos*, see plate 3,) shown on the veil attached to the crossbar of the



The Holy Face Not-Made-by-Human-Hands.



The Pantocrator: *Hagia Sophia, Thessalonica, 16th C.*

labarum. In 622, the emperor Heraclius himself carried this image and showed it to his troops before a battle against the Persians. The role therefore of this image, miraculously given to men, was to protect and to give victory over the enemy, over every enemy, that is over evil.

Pierre du Bourquet concludes his study on this subject as follows:

> *This first period of creative activity, as it relates to the icon, does not claim to express its essence. If we are to understand this essence in its specific richness, we need to take into account the theology which developed during the iconoclastic struggle....This theology allows us...to situate the cult of the icon in its true perspective: neither divinization of art nor magic superstition, but a symbolic and efficacious cult which has its roots in the mystery of Christ's incarnation (6).*

The notion of an efficacious symbol also appeared in popular piety. The 4th and 5th centuries were not only the golden age of the Church fathers and of monasticism, but they were also the era when people loved to venerate the saints and the places where they were martyred. A growing interest in pilgrimages spread over the whole East especially in Palestine. As monasticism reached its height, throngs of Christians were attracted to the relics of the spiritual masters. In these sacred places, workshops were set up to produce small commemorative medals, lamps, and phials, and these were decorated with the image of the saint or Christian symbols. For the pilgrims, these objects were not just souvenirs, but in them was present the protective power of the saint. The danger of superstition was of course very much present: in the 8th century, the extension of this cult in popular piety helps explain the hostility of the iconoclasts.

The First Opponents of the Image

After a slow preparatory period of four centuries, the image was generally accepted in all the Church; it had a role to play in the piety of the faithful, and by being transformed into a cultic portrait, the image became an icon. However, at certain periods, opposition to images was manifested, but up until the 8th century, these protests were limited and did not have any consequences for the whole of the Church.

Motivated by a fear of idolatry, Tertullian (7), Clement of

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6. Pierre du Bourquet, 'La naissance de l'icône et ses conditionnements historiques a Byzance', *Plamia*, t. 11 (no. 41, Plques, 1975, Meudon), p. 41.

7. Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, P.L. 1, col. 665-66, 669-671, etc.

Alexandria (8), Minucius Felix (9), and Lactancius (10) had already sounded an alarm: paganism and its art were still too much alive, and too threatening, for the first Christians who were just beginning to deepen their faith. This is, in any case, how we ought to understand canon 36 of the council of Elvira, in Spain, (300-303), and this despite its many interpretations: "It has seemed pleasing to us to decree that there should not be paintings in the churches so as not to depict on the walls that which is honored and worshiped." (11) This council, it must be remembered, was held during the Diocletian persecution, and there was a great risk that holy things might be profaned. Such a decision, however, was only valid for Spain at that time because only a century later when paganism had ceased to represent a real danger, sacred art found eloquent defenders in the persons of St. John Chrysostom, St. Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Cyril of Alexandria and above all St. Basil who in a sermon had this to say in honor of the holy martyr Barlaam:

> *Come to my aid, you who can paint great events. By your art, complete the imperfect image of this army leader. Using paints and colors, make the victorious athlete shine, him whom I have described with such little brilliance... (12)*

However, the importance that the fathers attributed to the image was not of an artistic, but of a pastoral, nature. Thus in his *Elogy* St. Gregory of Nyssa was able to speak in the following way about the martyr Theodore:

> *The artist is to show all this through the art of colors as in a book that had a tongue to speak with. For the silent image can speak from the walls where it is seen by all, and there it renders the greatest service. As for him who arranges stones into mosaics, by him the earth we trample under foot has become worthy of telling the story in images. (13)*

We have a text from Leontius, bishop of Neapolis in

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8. Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Pagans*, P.G. 8, col. 161; *The Stromata*, P.G. 9, col. 437.

9.Minicius Felix, *Octavius*, P.L. 3, col. 338-341.

10.Lactantius, *The Divine Institutions*, P.L. 84, col. 306.

11. "Placuit picturas in ecclesia esse non debere, ne quod colitur et adoratur in parietibus dipignatur", P.L. 84, col. 306.

12. *Sermon on St. Barlaam*, P.G. 31, col. 488-89.

13. P.G. 46, col. 757.

Cyprus, that clearly explains the reasons for images. (14) In the writing of Leontius, as in St. Basil, we see the beginning of a theology of icons. The arguments against the image, however, did not arise just from a concern for the purity of the Christian faith; they came also from Judaism and especially from the Monophysite resistance after the Council of Chalcedon (451).

In his letter to Constantine's sister, Constantia, Eusebius of Caesarea refused to try to find an image of Christ; he declared that it was impossible to represent the glorified humanity of Christ because it had been transformed, divinized, *aleptos* (incomprehensible, imperceptible). For the Monophysites, the humanity of Christ had been absorbed into the divinity itself, after the resurrection. To draw an image of Christ would separate the humanity from the divinity; this was the very argument taken up again later by the iconoclasts. (16)

We also know about some violent attacks against images such as those of Epiphanius in Cyprus and in the West at Marseilles: bishop Serenus had all the images in his city destroyed; for his actions, Serenus was rebuked by pope Gregory the Great. The pope praised Serenus for having stopped the faithful from worshiping the images, but he criticized him for having deprived them of the teachings that the images portrayed. (17) The letter of pope Gregory also shows the western attitude toward images: they remain at the level of non-verbal teaching, naturally venerable like the cross, but the West has always missed the mystical dimension which was characteristic of the eastern attitude.

The Quinisext Council or the Council "In Trullo" (692)

On the eve of the iconoclastic controversy, probably in 692, the emperor Justinian II convoked a council in Constantinople which was to prove very important for Christian iconography. This council was called to deal with difficulties arising from the application of the two previous councils'

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14. Boris Bobrinskoy, "Bref apercu de la querelle des images", *Contacts*, t. 12 (no. 32, 1960), p. 229, quoted from Leontius of Neapolis, P.G. 98, col. 1600: "I represent Christ in the churches and in homes and in public places and on images, on canvas, in cellars, on clothes, everywhere, so that when we see them, we may remember... For us Christians by possessing images of Christ, it is Christ and his martyrs that we kiss in our hearts... As a result, he who fears God will honor, venerate, and worship as the Son of God, Christ our God and the representation of his cross and the images of his saints."

15. *Ibid.*, p. 229, note 2, quoting St. Basil, *Treatise on the Holy Spirit*, P. G. 32, col. 149.

16. On iconoclasm as the sum of all the Christological heresies, see Vladimir Soloviev, *La Russie et l'Eglise universelle*, Savine, Paris, 1889, pp. XXVIII-X XIX and XLIV-XLV, 140-42.

17. Bobrinskoy, p. 229, note 3, quoting St. Gregory, *Letters*, P.L. 77, col. 9 49.

decrees against monophysitism, origenism, and monotheletism as well as the remnants of paganism. In short, the goal of this new council was to reform certain types of conduct in the Byzantine Church and society.

The vast majority of the bishops at the council came from the East, with a few representatives from the other patriarchates. This council, called Quinisext, "penthekte" or "in Trullo" (18) because it was held in the imperial palace, was conceived as the completion of the 5th and 6th ecumenical councils. Among the 102 canons concerning every aspect of the Church's life, there were three dealing directly with iconography. Canon 73 recalled the importance of the holy cross and its veneration. Canon 100 prohibited "deceiving paintings which being exposed to public view corrupt the intelligence by exciting shameful pleasures..." The most important canon, however, was number 82 (19):

> *In certain reproductions of venerable images, the Precursor is figured, pointing to the lamb with his finger. This representation had been adopted as a symbol of grace, but it was a hidden figure of that true lamb who is Christ our God, which was shown to us according to the law. Having thus welcomed these ancient figures and shadows as symbols of the truth transmitted to the Church, we prefer today grace and truth themselves, as a fulfillment of this law. In consequence, and in order to expose to the sight of all, even with the help of painting, what is perfect, we decide that henceforth Christ our God must be represented in his human form instead of the ancient lamb.*

Alongside of representations of Christ in human form, there could still be seen images of the ancient symbol, the lamb which was often used in the West. According to the fathers of the council, these symbols, especially the lamb, belong to a previous stage of development; because the faith of the Church had been deepened and enriched by the dogmas of the councils, "we prefer today grace and truth themselves, as a fulfillment of this law." The symbol of Christ, therefore, must give place to the face of God incarnate, to the historical person of Christ.

Thus canon 82 of the Quinisext Council expresses, for the first time, the teaching of the Church on the icon and simultaneously indicates the possibility of conveying a reflec-

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18. "Trullum" means "dome", and refers to a hall of the imperial palace where affairs of state were dealt with.

19. John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, N.Y., 1975, pp. 177-8.

tion of the divine glory through the means of art and with the help of some symbolism. (20)

All of the figurative possibilities of art converge towards the same end: to convey faithfully a concrete, veracious image, a historical reality, and through this historical image, to reveal another spiritual and eschatological truth. (21)

Unfortunately due to many external difficulties, it took nearly a century for the Quinisext Council to be accepted by Pope Adrian I, and then this was only possible thanks to the "exegesis" of Tarasius, Patriarch of Constantinople.

An outside observer might be somewhat surprised by the circumstances surrounding the presentation of the council's decisions. Here are some of factors which were to make it rather difficult for Rome to accept the canons of the Quinisext Council: the largely eastern make up of the council, the canons which opposed elements of the Roman tradition, the doubtful authenticity of some of the signatures, and the emperor Justinian II's pressure on Pope John VIII, even physical violence, encouraging him to accept the canons. It is no wonder then that canon 82 was condemned to oblivion in the mind of the western Church.

Despite Rome's reluctant acceptance of the Quinisext Council, the defenders of icons were not to find more faithful allies than the bishops of Rome. They staunchly defended Orthodoxy without however changing their basic conception of the sacred image. It is certainly legitimate to think, however, that if the Quinisext Council and its prolonged sessions had taken place under more proper conditions, canon 82 would have had an influence on the sacred art of the West.

The First Iconoclastic Period

This enormous crisis swept over the Byzantine empire not simply as a religious quarrel, but as the coming to a head of many religious, political, and economic tendencies. It was the end of an era. Iconoclasm called into question the values held in all levels of society.

The complexity of iconoclasm as a phenomenon does not permit us to be very precise about its origins or even about the factors which contributed to its development, but dogmatic questions certainly form the background of the problem. The previous ecumenical councils had worked out a

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20. Ouspensky, p. 120 in the English edition *Theology of the Icon* (quoting G. A. Rhalli and M. Potli, Syntagma d'Athènes, t.2, Chartophylax 1852, p. 492) and p. 123.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

Christology that was especially contentious in eastern areas under Jewish and Islamic influence. Superstitious, even idolatrous, practices concerning images only reinforced the opposition of iconoclastic tendencies. There were certainly political aspects also that contributed to the conflict, namely the emperor's agrarian policy which was aimed at the monasteries. At the time, they were the great landowners, the principle source of icons, and the greatest beneficiaries of their veneration. There were two other factors which played a role in the crisis: 1) the rivalry between profane and religious art and 2) a certain unavowed desire to regain the riches invested in the sanctuaries. All these tendencies help us to understand the attitude of the emperors, and their role proved to be decisive.

In 721, the caliph Yazid II resorted to very draconian measures in order to eliminate all the images from the sanctuaries and homes of the provinces under his authority. Taking his cue from the caliph's iconoclasm, the emperor Leo III took the initiative and provoked a crisis after unfruitful consultations with the pope and patriarch. Leo himself was from the eastern provinces of the empire where Monophysite sentiment was very much alive; he was a brilliant army leader and recruited his soldiers almost exclusively from these eastern areas. He was an able administrator and was deeply convinced of his mission: to reform the empire and the Church. He even wrote to Pope Gregory II saying, "I am priest and emperor." (22) The emperor's policy promised to have many advantages also: it would raise the cultural level of the people, unify the empire, strengthen the economy, and bring the empire closer to Asiatic regions and to Islam.

Starting in 725, the iconoclastic movement was supported by three bishops from Asia Minor: Theodosius of Ephesus, Thomas of Claudiopolis, and Constantine of Nacolia. Constantine went to Constantinople to try to win over the patriarch, St. Germanus, to the iconoclastic cause, but the patriarch refused to accept any doctrine that contradicted the councils and the tradition of the Church.

In a long letter, the patriarch defended with great energy the cause of the holy images; his was a futile exercise because the outcome had already been decided. With the emperor's support, the three iconoclastic bishops proceeded to destroy the images in their respective regions; the time had also come for Leo to make his position known and to intervene personally, though probably without a formal edict. Being a statesman and recognizing the people's attachment to im-

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22. Gian-Domenico Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, t. 12, Huber Welter, Paris-Leipzig-Arnhem, 1901, col. 975.

ages, the emperor first tried to win over public opinion, but the people and the clergy continued to oppose his plans. During this early period, an underwater volcanic eruption took place near Santorini north of Crete; massive destruction was wrought in the surrounding regions. In Leo's mind, this disaster was God's punishment for the idolatrous veneration of images; this was the moment for him to act, and he thus ordered the destruction of a greatly venerated icon of Christ above the Bronze Gate in Constantinople. Immediately there was a riot. A group of women shook the ladder that an officer had climbed up on; he and the other officers encircling him were killed. Irritated by these events, Leo ordered the punishment of the guilty persons. As a result, people were arrested, tortured, and even executed. Leo's action aroused the indignation of the population all across the empire. This was just the event that certain discontented officers were waiting for; they, along with the army of the Helladic province (Greece and the Cyclades) rebelled and advanced on Constantinople. Their flotilla, however, was defeated.

When the emperor realized the seriousness of this revolt, he tried to win over the patriarch to his cause, but St. Germanus would not be intimidated. When he was invited to the Senate ('silention') to sign an act that prohibited the veneration of images, the patriarch stood up, took off his omophorion (the bishop's stole), and cried out: "I am like Jonah; throw me into the sea. I can have no other faith, Oh Emperor, than that of the ecumenical council." He then left and went to his ancestral home where he stayed for the rest of his life.

Some days later, Leo arranged for the election of a new patriarch, Anastasius, one of his faithful courtiers. There were now no more obstacles to the implimentation of his policy. The images in the churches were replaced by flowers, ornaments, birds, and even scenes of the hunt and of the horse races. What is striking in this type of painting is that it was a return to ancient models. In the final analysis, it was a return to paganism which expressed itself in the liturgy as well; preaching was strengthened along with an increase in religious poetry and all sorts of music. Pope Gregory II wrote to the emperor Leo III in the following words: "You have occupied the people with vain speeches, futile talk, cithers, castanets, flutes, and nonsense: instead of thanksgivings and doxologies, you have thrown the people into fables." (23)

A systematic persecution began in Constantinople. Every citizen had to bring his icons to a public place so they could be burned. Many of the clerics, monastics, and faithful who resisted were condemned, tortured, or killed; others simply

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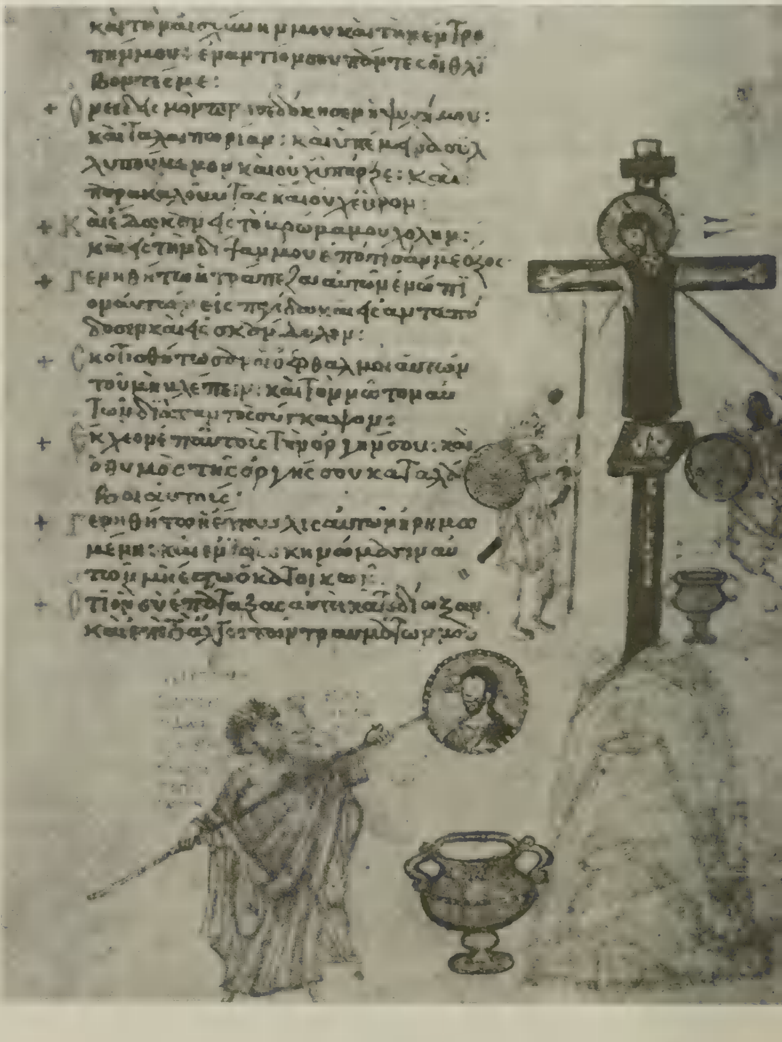
23. *Ibid.*, p. 978.



A Miniature of a Greek Psalter: #129, 9th c. (Museum of History, Moscow, fo 67).

left the capital.

But outside the boundaries of the empire, two formidable adversaries took up the fight against the emperor. The new pope, Gregory III, had already answered the letters of Leo point by point, with an apostolic energy that the emperor had great difficulty digesting. In 731, the pope convoked a council in Rome which excommunicated everyone who "opposed the veneration of the holy images and blasphemed against them, destroyed them, or profaned them." (24)

Leo was so exasperated by this resistance that he confiscated the patrimonies of St. Peter, increased the taxes in Calabria and Sicily, and finally detached the provinces of Illyricum from Roman jurisdiction and gave them to the patriarchate of Constantinople. These reprisals were the acts of an impotent man, and so for the last years of his life, Leo resigned himself to consolidating his work which, on his deathbed, he gave over to his son Constantine V Copronymus.

It was at this time that a second adversary of iconoclasm came to the defense of images: St. John of Damascus. He lived in Palestine which was then occupied by the Arabs and thus out of the clutches of the emperor. St. John was an eminent theologian who belonged to the equally eminent Mansur family. They were highly placed officials in the government of the Ommiad caliphs. In his *Treatises on the Defense of the Images*, he set out a theology of the icon that has been used by theologians ever since. As was the case with St. Germanus, St. John's argument was Christological:

> *If we made an image of the invisible God, we would certainly be in error...but we do not do anything of the kind; we do not err, in fact, if we make the image of God incarnate who appeared on earth in the flesh, who in his ineffable goodness, lived with men and assumed the nature, the volume, the form, and the color of the flesh. (25)*

The legitimacy of the image was thus founded on the incarnation. By it the interdiction of the Old Testament was abolished, and the relation between creator and creatures was totally changed.

The liturgical veneration of icons was thus justified: it was not a question of latria, of an absolute worship due only to God, but of respect, the veneration which is directed toward persons or things having a religious dignity. We will come back to the doctrine of St. John of Damascus later when we

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24. *Liber pontificalis*, edited by Louis Duchesne, t.1, Thorin, Paris, p. 416.

25. St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, (P.G. 94, col. 1320), St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, N.Y., 1980, pp. 52-3.

present some elements of his theology of the icon.

Constantine V and the Council of Hieria

The new emperor, Constantine V, showed himself to be more implacable than his father. The crisis deepened, and it seemed that the time of the ancient persecutions had returned, but the discontent at all levels of the society also increased. General Artavasdos, the emperor's father-in-law, organized a revolt with the aid of the Orthodox, captured Constantinople, and forced Constantine to flee; Patriarch Anastasius was always ready to change his mind to please a new master and so crowned Artavasdos emperor. What is more, Anastasius re-established the veneration of images and excommunicated his former master Constantine V as a heretic. Constantine was however able to recapture the city, and after having inflicted an exemplary punishment on Artavasdos, he easily obtained a resubmission to iconoclasm from Anastasius.

The echos of St. John of Damascus' writings along with those of Pope Gregory III were having their effect throughout all the Church, and as the tensions mounted everywhere, the emperor was forced to consolidate his accomplishments rather than to seek new advances. He thus decided to convoke a council to ratify his edict, a veritable theology of iconoclasm. This general council had been well prepared by regional assemblies when it began in 754 at Hieria in an imperial palace near the capital.

Due to the fact that the acts of this council have been lost to history leaving only the *horos*, that is the final statement (signed by 388 Byzantine bishops but not by the other patriarchates), we cannot determine who was in fact the author of the texts. Modern historians attribute the council's iconoclastic doctrine to the emperor himself, aided perhaps by the bishops from Asia Minor.

The following argument was put forward to show that it was impossible to represent Christ or the saints: if we represent the divinity, we confuse the natures, and we claim to be able to "circumscribe" what cannot be expressed. If we represent the humanity, we divide what must be united in the person of Christ and thus fall into Nestorianism. Through a material image, we would thus deny the hypostatic union which had been defined by the Council of Chalcedon. (26) In addition, matter which is used to make images degrades the original holiness of the model. The only possible icon, instituted by Christ himself, is the eucharist which is the mystic

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26. Meyendorff, pp. 180-8. .id 7 27. *Ibid.*, pp. 173-92; Mansi, t. 13, 1902, col. 374 ff.

presence of the incarnation. The only permitted representation of the saints is to follow their examples and strive for moral perfection.

In reality, iconoclastic doctrine did not accept the perfect hypostatic union: the union without confusion of divinity and humanity in the person of Christ. It manifested rather a Monophysite foundation: according to the iconoclastic view, the human nature of Christ was practically absorbed by the divinity.

The final statement of the council of Hieria contained the solemn condemnation of "the criminal art of painting" and those who defended images: Germanus, George of Cyprus, and John of Damascus.

The promulgation of the conciliar decree set off a new wave of persecutions, tortures, exiles, spoliations, forced marriages of monks, and executions. Nothing was too good for the opponents of iconoclasm since they could now be branded as official heretics. The monasteries became centers of resistance and so felt the fury of Constantine's hatred in a special way. He threw their relics into the sea, transformed monastic buildings into army barracks or stables, and even prohibited the use of the words *saint* and *monk*. In 761, some 342 monks were mutilated in various ways and put into the Pretorian prison; others gave their lives for Orthodoxy such as Stephen the Young, Andrew the Cretan, and Paul of Crete... Even the patriarch, Anastasius, was not saved. Although he had been a creature of the emperor, he was later exiled and beheaded.

The Re-establishment of the Holy Images (780-813)

In 775, Constantine V left the empire to his son Leo IV the Khazar. Despite the new emperor's attachment to iconoclasm, he applied the decrees in a rather liberal fashion. His reign thus was marked by an easing of the persecution. After his death in 780, the regency was assumed by his wife Irene since Leo IV's only son, Constantine, was just six years old. Irene came from Athens and was a devoted and faithful laywoman; she intended to change the prevailing state of affairs. She had several Orthodox bishops elected and as well obtained a retraction of iconoclastic errors from Paul IV, the patriarch. At his death, Irene proceeded with the election of Tarasius as patriarch. Up till then, he had been Patriarch Paul's secretary. Though Tarasius was still a layman and a soldier, he immediately abolished the iconoclastic decisions of the council of Hieria and called for the convocation of a truly ecumenical council.

This council opened in 786 with representatives from Rome and the other patriarchates, but at the very first session, the imperial guard revolted, and the empress was forced to dissolve the council. The joy of the iconoclasts was, however, short-lived. Irene was able to disarm the mutinous troops by a surprise maneuvre and brought loyal soldiers from Trace into the capital. Five months later, she convoked another council at Nicaea, in a more secure area. On September 24, 787, some 300 bishops, numerous monk delegates, and legates from the various patriarchates opened the first session in Nicaea's cathedral, Hagia Sophia.

Among the eight sessions of Nicaea II, the 5th, 6th, and 7th were the most important from the dogmatic point of view. Using texts from Holy Scripture and the fathers, the 5th session proved that the veneration of images was a legitimate practice. The central truth of the council can be summed up in the following distinction: images receive relative or honorific veneration, *proskynesis schetike*, and not worship, *latria*, which is reserved for God alone. What is more, images are not the ultimate object of veneration because the image only has a reality in relation to the object represented: the image is the reflection of the prototype. Because the veneration of the image is addressed to the prototype, Christ, the veneration is transformed into worship. (27)

The final decree of the council was signed by all the fathers present; iconoclasm was thus condemned as a pernicious heresy. In addition, the council ordered the destruction of iconoclastic writings and re-established the liturgical veneration of images. In the 28 disciplinary canons issued by the council, however, the fathers showed themselves tolerant toward the iconoclastic bishops, and this despite the presence of a rigorist monastic party.

The *Caroline Books* and the Council of Frankfurt

It seems probable that the emperor Charlemagne who had become the protector of the Roman Church did not even know about the convocation of the Second Council of Nicaea. For many years, the attitude of the Frankish court toward the Greeks had been more than just unfavorable. The bad memories of the engagement of Charlemagne's daughter to Constantine VI which had been arbitrarily broken off by the empress Irene, the confrontations in Illyria, the Byzantine policy in Italy: all this seemed to confirm the feeling in Charlemagne's empire that Byzantium was once again imposing its will on the whole Church. Thus, when the acts of the council arrived at Charlemagne's court, everyone was greatly surprised and even dumbfounded. The Latin transla-

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27. *Ibid.*, pp. 173-92; Mansi, t. 13, 1902, col. 374 ff.

tion of the Greek acts was so poor that Anastasius the Librarian, a century later, said that the work was done by a bad translator rather ignorant of Latin as well as Greek. (28) This translation contained such errors as "worship images" instead of "venerate images" and such misunderstandings as "I accept and embrace the images of the cult of worship which I offer to the consubstantial and life-giving Trinity." This is exactly the opposite of what bishop George of Cyprus had said.

It is understandable that from then on the young "barbarian" state and its theologians felt convinced that the moment had come for them to speak out and save the true faith of the Church. We need not be surprised then to see that Charlemagne's theologians (especially his adviser Alcuin) made a vigorous reply; their answer to Nicaea II is known by the name of the *Caroline Books (Libri Carolini)*. Step by step, the Frankish theologians refuted the acts of the council, according to the faulty translation they possessed.

Because they had never really understood the importance of the discussions about images, the western churchmen imposed on the whole debate a conception which had already been propagated by Gregory the Great. For them, images were the book of the illiterate. Lacking the sharpness of the Byzantines, the Franks were not aware of all the Christological dimensions of the icon; they had never had to fight against Monophysitism or Islamic influences. In their eyes, the Greeks equated values which had nothing in common. Charlemagne's theologians made an appeal to common sense: "Man can be saved without seeing images but not without the knowledge of God."

The negative attitude of the *Caroline Books* was confirmed by the council of Frankfurt in 794:

> *Assuredly, neither one or the other of the two councils merits the title "seventh"; as we are attached to Orthodox doctrine which provides that images only serve to beautify the churches as well as to recall past events..., we want neither to prohibit images, with one of the councils, nor to worship them, with the other; and so we reject the writings of this ridiculous council. (29)*

Here we have the expression of reservations and hostility against the Greek Church which, as the Franks thought, had set itself up in council as the infallible governor of Christianity. Frankfurt was a protest against the Byzantine theory that seemed to identify the universal and the eastern Churches (30)

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28. Fliche et Martin, *Histoire de l'Eglise depuis les origines jusqu'à nos jours*, t. 6. Bloud et Gay, Paris, 1947, p. 121, note 3.

29. Bobrinskoy, p. 237.

30. *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, t. 11, col. 2267 ff.

Pope Hadrian I, however, also had some responsibility in the evolution of events; he had not informed Charlemagne about the convocation of Nicaea II. When the pope received the *Caroline Books* and the acts of the council of Frankfurt, he rejected the condemnation of the Council of Nicaea, but he also hesitated to accept its decisions. At the time, political and legal problems were far more pressing. As a result, the question of images was shifted into the background.

The Second Iconoclastic Period

The empress Irene's reign was not a happy one. Her strong hand on her son Constantine VI resulted in a revolt in which Constantine took power but committed error after error: he was defeated in Bulgaria; he inflicted cruel punishments on his brothers after catching them in a plot; and he provoked protests from the Church by the scandal of his multiple marriages. Finally Irene was able to trap him in a treasonous act and had him blinded in the Porphyry, the golden hall of the palace where he had been born. To say the least, Irene's actions did not make her very popular. By her carelessness, she committed her own grave errors: she nearly bankrupted the treasury, disorganized the themes (armies) of Asia, and ruined Byzantine influence in the West by an awkward manipulation of alliances. Perhaps her most serious failure was allowing the crowning of Charlemagne as emperor of the West in 800. In Byzantine law, this was a veritable usurpation. (31)

Thus it seemed quite logical for Irene to be overthrown in 802. Her two immediate successors, Nicephorus Logothete (802-811) and Michael Rhangabe (811-813) remained faithful to the decisions of Nicaea II. In Constantinople the monks, being grouped around their igumens Plato and St. Theodore, formed a real center of power, and after the death of Patriarch Tarasius, these monks vigorously protested against the direct election of a simple lay hermit, Nicephorus, as patriarch. For them, the election was not canonical. The conflict reached its height when the patriarch Nicephorus, on orders from the emperor, lifted the excommunication of the priest Joseph who had presided at the illegitimate marriage of Constantine VI. St. Theodore and the other Studites withdrew from the communion of the patriarch, were put in prison, and later exiled.

To say the least, these events did not have a favorable impact on the unity of the Orthodox. As a result, after the Byzantine defeat at the hands of the Bulgarians in 813, the military leaders, who were still iconoclasts in part, overthrew

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31. Louis Brehier, *Vie et mort de Byzance*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1946, pp. 87- 91.

Michael Rhangabe and set Leo V the Armenian on the throne; Leo was the former general of Anatolia and an iconoclast.

The beginning of Leo V's reign was marked by the establishment of order in the empire and the suppression of military revolts. These results came to the emperor rather easily but at a high price, such as the abandonment of the West. From the moment of his enthronement, Leo V made it clear that in his opinion the evils that had befallen the empire were caused by the veneration of images, but he did not challenge public opinion by any iconoclastic actions. In October, 814, thanks to his successes, the emperor was firmly established in his position, and so after having gathered together the acts of Hieria, the iconoclastic council of 754, demanded that Patriarch Nicephorus prohibit the liturgical veneration of images or prove their legitimacy. After the charade of a debate, Nicephorus was exiled and replaced by a layman, Theodore, in 815. This new patriarch quickly called a council in Hagia Sophia which confirmed the iconoclastic council of 754 and rejected the Council of Nicaea II. He prohibited the veneration of icons but in a more moderate fashion than during the first iconoclastic period. However, the resistance of the Orthodox opposition was more solid and coherent than before. St. Theodore the Studite organized a procession for Palm Sunday in which 1000 monks carrying icons took part. St. Theodore was summoned to the council of Hagia Sophia, but he refused to go as long as the legitimate patriarch was exiled; as a result Theodore himself was exiled.

In 820, a new plot was discovered; Michael the Stammerer, a former soldier and friend of Leo V, was behind it. Michael was condemned to death, but his execution was put off until after the Christmas season; he was saved by his supporters who entered the palace and assassinated Leo V in his chapel during matins. Michael was proclaimed emperor, commuted the sentences of those in exile, and opened the doors of the prisons. Being a soldier by profession and uneducated but prudent, the new emperor thought he could reconcile the two parties, Orthodox and iconoclast, by bringing them together in a council. St. Theodore Studite refused to deal with his adversaries on an equal footing and demanded that the questions be submitted to the judgment of Old Rome. In order to appease the Orthodox opposition, Michael was finally forced to win over to his cause both Pope Pascal I and the western emperor Louis the Pious. In his letter to Louis, Michael allowed the use of holy images but refused to venerate them liturgically; he felt that such a practice had degenerated into superstition. (32)

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32. Mansi, t. 14, 1902, col. 417-422.

A council was therefore convoked in Paris in 825 which was acceptable to the emperor Michael but not to Pope Pascal I. Neither the Frankish nor the Byzantine sources mention what happened after this council; Michael the Stammerer thus died before the question was finally decided.

His successor and son, Theophilus, who had already been crowned at the beginning of the reign of his father, became emperor in 829. Theophilus had received a good education from his master John the Grammarian who had instilled in the young boy a taste for theological questions and a great devotion to iconoclastic dogmas. Byzantine historians described him as a pitiless but just judge who did not spare even the highest civil servants of the court.

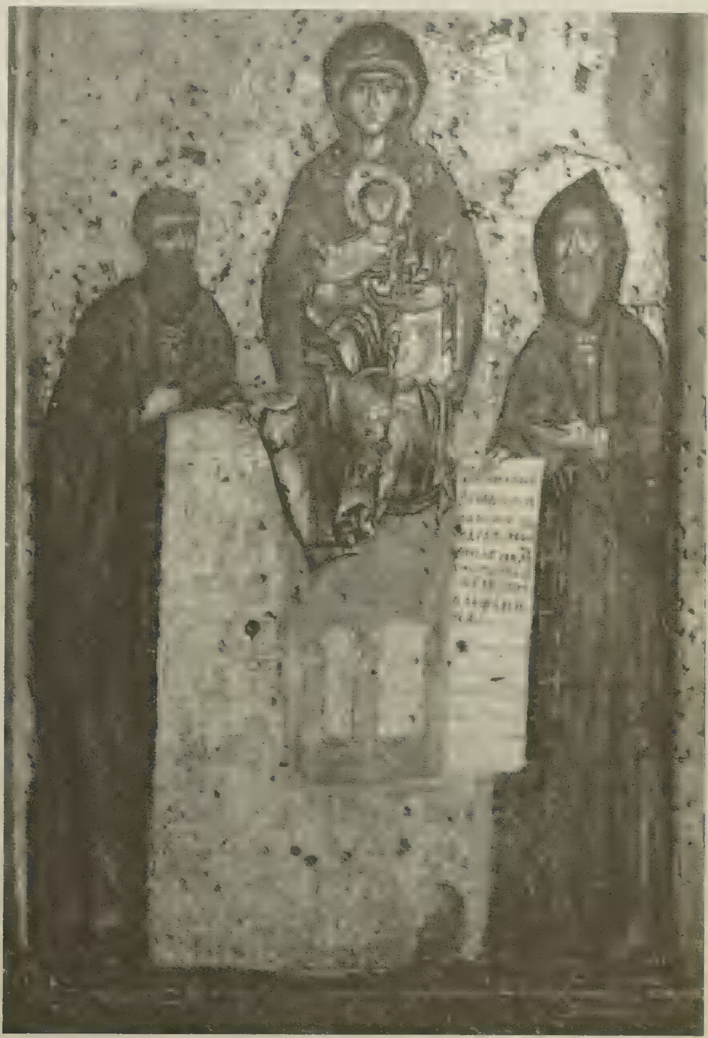
Theophilus was a brilliant army leader, a good administrator, a great builder, and an art lover; he was also successful in rebuilding the prestige of the empire. He unfortunately manifested a great narrowness in religious matters, and probably under the influence of Patriarch John, Theophilus convoked a council in 832 to be held at Blachernae; the goal of this council was to renew the iconoclastic decrees.

The Orthodox were not to be intimidated, however; once again, the monks, especially those of St. Abraham's Monastery, protested and argued the legitimacy of the liturgical veneration of icons. In addition, the patriarchs of the East sent a letter to the emperor; this letter was a veritable apologetical treatise. Irritated by this opposition, Theophilus took administrative and legislative measures to rid the churches and private homes of icons. Once again the prisons were filled with bishops, monks, and iconographers.

Thanks to Theophilus' natural clemency, more cruel punishments were not ordered, but certain monks, like Theodore and Theophane from Jerusalem, were branded. The persecution, however, was limited to the capital and the surrounding areas and was maintained only by the personal will of the emperor.

The Triumph of Orthodoxy

The death of Theophilus in 842 was also the death of iconoclasm. Political power passed into the hands of Theodora and her three year old son, Michael. During the persecution, Theodora had remained faithful to Orthodoxy and had secretly venerated icons. In her entourage, everyone knew that the re-establishment of Orthodoxy was about to take place, but it would take a few more months to overcome various obstacles: eliminate a certain opposition in the army and the clergy, avoid the blackening of her husband's memory by an anathema, and above all, secure the depositon of the patriarch, John the Grammarian. Theodora had already chosen John's successor in the person of the igumen Methodius; he was a confessor of Orthodoxy and highly regarded in Constantinople.



***The Mother of God and Sts. Theodosius and Anthony:** The Monastery of the Caves, around 1288 (Kievan School, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow).*

Even though his lips had been mutilated by the hot irons of the iconoclasts and though he was forced to wrap his jaws with strips of white cloth during public functions, Methodius retained enough spirit and voice to dictate his hymns and speeches which were always feared by the enemies of images. In fact, the white pieces of cloth used by Methodius became the marks and ornaments of his successors' pontificates. (33)

After a year of preparations, Theodora convoked a council. When John the Grammarian refused to take part, he was

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33. Eugene Marin, *Les moines de Constantinople depuis la fondation de la ville jusqu'a la mort de Photius (330-898)*, Lecoffre, Paris, 1897, p. 360.

deposed and replaced by Methodius. The canons of the first seven councils were once again proclaimed; the legitimacy of the veneration of images was defended; and the iconoclasts and all heretics were condemned. Nonetheless the memory of the dead emperor, Theophilus, was respected, and Theodora was assured by the bishops that he would find pardon before God.

There was only one thing left to do, and that was to celebrate the great event, the decisive victory, after a century of struggle. The first Sunday of Great Lent, March 11, 843, was set for the festivities. There was an impressive procession presided over by Patriarch Methodius; the empress and the whole court led the procession and behind them followed the monks and the faithful. Many of them still carried on their bodies the marks and proofs of their fidelity. The whole group moved to Hagia Sophia to celebrate the feast of Orthodoxy or the definitive triumph of truth. (34)

We keep the laws of the Church, laws which have been observed by our fathers; we paint images of Christ and the saints, and we venerate them with our lips, our hearts, and our wills. The honor and the veneration addressed to the image rebounds to the prototype. This is the doctrine of the fathers, inspired by God; it is the doctrine we follow; and we cry aloud with faith to Christ: Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord. (the canon from matins, 6th ode)

Summary of the Iconoclastic Crisis

With the triumph of Orthodoxy, we see the end of a crisis that had important consequences not only for the Byzantine world but also for the whole of Europe.

In the struggle against the iconoclastic emperors, the doctrinal authority and autonomy of the Church were consolidated. Before, as well as after iconoclasm, the emperor had a supreme position; he was God's representative and the protector of the Church. The canons of the Church had no force in law except by the approval of the emperor. He could even depose a recalcitrant patriarch. After the iconoclastic crisis, however, we see the appearance of a clear separation between the prerogatives of the state and the action of the Church, and this despite the interpenetration of the spiritual and the temporal realms. The authority of the emperor was limited by divine law and doctrinal Orthodoxy. The two realms found their balance in a "symphony," a working together which brought peace and prosperity to the bodies

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34. This feast is still celebrated today on the first Sunday of Great Lent.

and souls of the citizens of the empire. (35).

In its relations with Rome, the iconoclastic crisis also had repercussions. The pope's strong support of the Orthodox had provoked conflicts with the iconoclastic emperors. The popes were convinced, however, by various factors, that they could no longer put their hope in the emperors in Constantinople; these factors included the emperors' political actions, the scorn of the Byzantines for the Christian West, scorn which was gladly returned by the westerners, and the weakness of the Byzantine positions in Italy. Thus the western Church turned to the Franks. The result was an alliance between Stephen I and Pepin, 754, which was eventually to result in the crowning of Charlemagne in 800. The opinion of historians on the importance of these events is divided. If iconoclasm was the beginning of a new split between the West and the East which was to deepen and contribute to the final separation of the great schism of 1054, no one doubted that the two Churches still shared many elements and were only different spheres of the same world.

A renewal of monasticism constituted another consequence of the victory over iconoclasm. By their courage and sacrifices during the struggle, the monks gained much prestige. In addition, Theodore, the igumen of the Studion monastery in Constantinople, had reformed and minutely organized monastic life according to the rules of St. Basil. His reforms became the model for the other monasteries in the whole East.

The monks were also influencial because they promoted a liturgical renewal. By adopting certain elements of the ritual used in Jerusalem, the Byzantine liturgy received its definitive shape which it preserves even today. The office books (the Triodion, Pentecostarion, and Octoechos) were reformed and completed with hymns from contemporary authors.

This liturgical renewal resulted in a general spiritual renewal, and the Church recognized a large number of monastic spiritual masters. In the cities, these spiritual athletes exercised a considerable influence by their lives and by the moral support they gave to lay people at all levels of society. In their solitude, their contemplative prayer was a source of life for the whole Church. It was especially toward Mount Athos that Eastern Europe turned for its inspiration, for its continual renewal, even as does Orthodoxy today.

Finally the victory over iconoclasm was to have an immense influence in the realm of sacred art.

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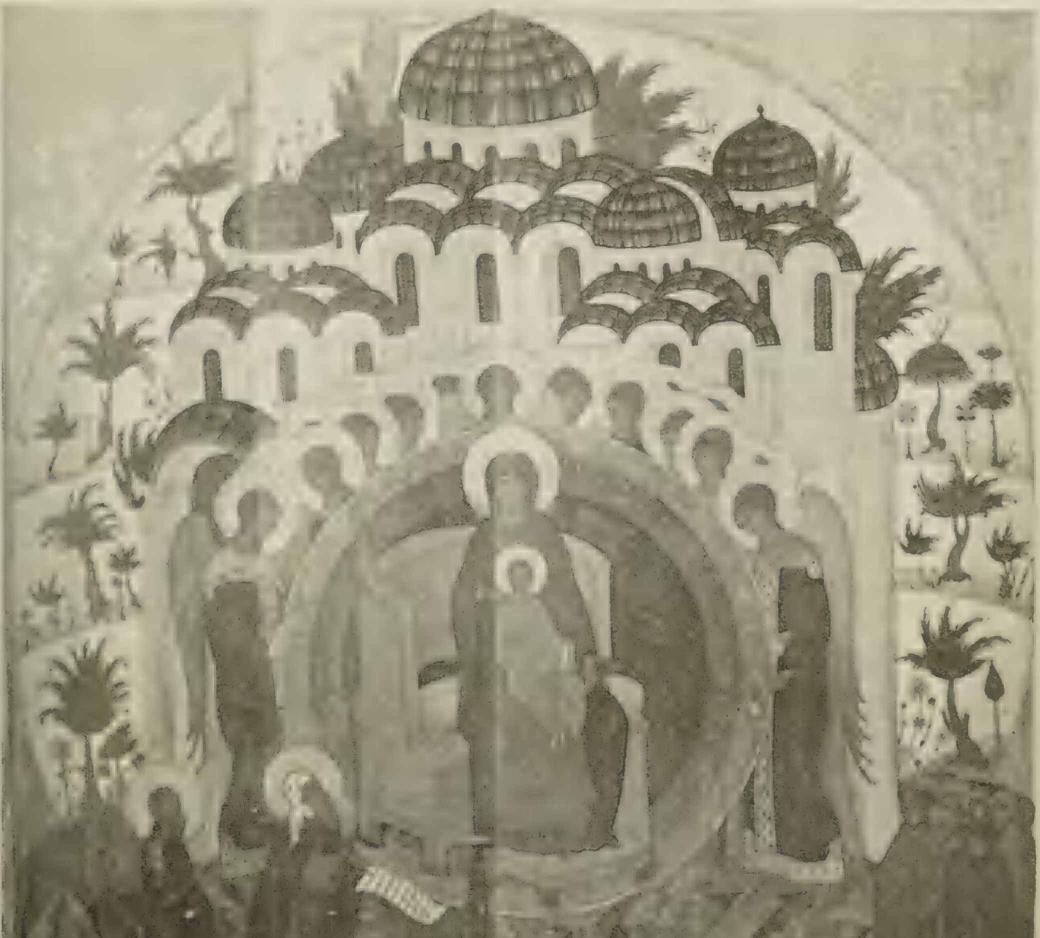
35. The collection of legal texts from the end of the 9th century,*Ecloga Leonis et Constantini Epanogoge Basilii*, *Leonis et Alexandri*, title III, chapter VI II (edition of Carl-Eduard Zachariae von Lilienthal, Collectio Liborum juris graeco-romani ineditorum, Leipzig, 1852, p. 68.).

As for iconoclasm itself, it had disastrous consequences. The systematic destruction of priceless art treasures as well as a large number of documents have deprived historians of precious material which would have helped us to better understand the entire period. It is also true, however, that other countries profited by the exodus of artists from Byzantium: Italy and especially Rome owe a great deal to these refugees from the eastern empire.

How can we best focus on what was essentially at stake in the iconoclastic controversy? For an outside observer, iconoclasm may appear to be the accidental conjunction of different conflicts or perhaps a chain reaction of crises just ready to explode. The question of images would then simply be the catalyst which set off the reaction. Seen from the inside, however, this struggle unveils a crisis of unbelievable importance. The question of images remains fundamental for it is closely tied to the very essence of Christianity, to the incarnation.

It was the incarnation which was questioned by iconoclasm, and it was the incarnation that was defended in the liturgical veneration of icons. The icon is the reflection of the prototype, and each icon is the reflection of the person of Christ who without mixture unites in himself divine and human natures. This principle of the union of the divine and the human dominates every aspect of the Church's life: doctrine, sacraments, relations with the world, liturgy, and art.



Icon entitled "In Thee, All Creatures Rejoice": *Moscow School, beginning of the 16th c. (Tretyakow Gallery, Moscow).*

Chapter 2

The Icon: Theological Elements

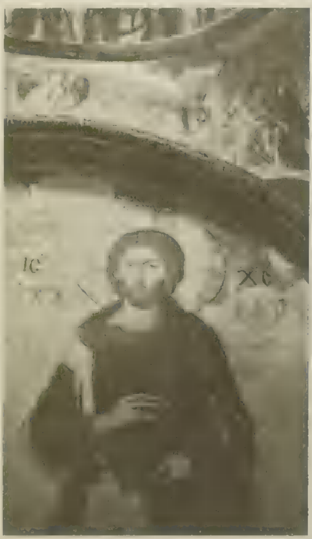
The Traditional Doctrine

The icon is intended to be an image of the invisible and even the presence of the Invisible One. Such a claim is somewhat surprising, more so probably for people of the 20th century than for those of times past. We must therefore ask how we can understand the icon in its deepest meaning.

On the first level of meaning, we can define the image as simply the bearer of information, even if the sacred image, in its symbolic nature, is clothed with a transcendent dimension. In fact, the image depicts a person or an event. It reminds us of the individual in the image and thus becomes a link between the person represented and the person looking at the image. All this, however, remains on the conscious, intelligible level. But it is precisely this level that the icon transcends. What is intelligible and touches the conscious mind is only the exterior surface of the icon. Its essence though is to be a point of contact, a place where we meet with a presence. Even though this presence is different from the being of the subject represented, it cannot be reduced to a simple souvenir which stirs our memory. How then can we theologically justify this conception of the icon as a place where we encounter a presence?

In searching for an answer to this question, we will learn how to distinguish an icon from every other image. We will also learn to understand its place in Holy Tradition and its role in the liturgical life of the Church as there have been worked out throughout history.

In the preceding chapter, we set out the history of the icon, the iconoclastic crisis, and the final victory of Orthodoxy. In this chapter, we will limit ourselves to the theological arguments that dominated the discussion and the conflict concerning icons. We are in fact dealing with a profound theological debate, not just an incidental question or a simple matter of piety. Iconoclasm was a recapitulation of all previous heresies. It attacked the heart of the Christian faith: the incarnation. The struggle between iconoclasts and iconodules, the Orthodox, was pushed to the point of martyrdom. The defense or condemnation of the liturgical veneration of icons is, and was, to be equated with the defense or denial of the Christian faith itself. (1)



Christ the Pantocrator.

The Iconoclastic Arguments

According to the iconoclastic vision, it was impossible to represent Christ the God-man, "No one has ever seen God." (I John 4:12). To justify the rejection of images, iconoclasts especially appealed to the Old Testament prohibition against the making of images of God. Such an image could only be an idol. (See plate 4)

It is, however, precisely on the basis of this argument that the defense of images was developed. St. Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople and St. John of Damascus showed that by the incarnation, the Old Testament prohibition had been abolished and that the relation between the Creator and creatures had been radically changed:

> *In former times God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. (2)*

Thus, right from the beginning of the debate, the Christological problem dominated the conflict over images, and it was on this ground that the iconoclastic synod of 754 answered the arguments of St. John of Damascus. Despite their Monophysite tendencies, the iconoclasts never dreamed of renouncing the doctrine established by the early councils. On the contrary, they used these very councils to confront the Orthodox with the following dilemma: if we affirm that the icon of Christ represents his humanity separated from his

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1. Vladimir Soloviev, *La grande controverse et la politique chrétienne (Orient et Occident)* Ubier-Montaigne, Paris, 1953, pp. 72-3.

2. St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, David Anderson, tr., St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1980, 'Apology I, 16,' p. 23.

divinity, we fall into Nestorianism. If, on the other hand, we affirm that the icon represents Christ in the fullness of his divinity and not of his humanity, we claim that his divinity can be represented, and this is impossible. Or we claim that his humanity has been mixed with his divinity, and this is Monophysitism. Iconoclastic argumentation thus remained faithful to the Chalcedonian definition which affirmed that in Christ, the two natures were united both "without confusion" and "without separation." According to the iconoclasts, this definition of the mystery, in negative, apophatic terms, was not compatible with a material image of Christ because the icon is a positive vision of the incarnate Word of God. Again according to them, it necessarily led either to the confusion or to the separation of the natures.

The iconoclasts thus considered themselves to be the defenders of the purity of the Christological dogmas. In reality, however, they knew nothing of Chalcedon's definition which was borrowed from St. Leo's Tome. According to this decree, the divine and human natures encountered each other in the unique person (hypostasis) of Christ, both conserving their proper mode of existence. Iconoclastic Christology fundamentally rejected the hypostatic union (union of the two natures in the person of Christ) as it is understood by Holy Tradition. According to this Tradition, the divine nature assumes the human nature, the divine clothes itself with the human. The divine nature thus becomes the assuming "subject." For iconoclastic Christology then, the real distinction between the two natures was called into question and the human characteristics were suppressed. In summary, iconoclasm was a resurgence of the Monophysite tendency.

After the iconoclastic synod of 754, the debate centered on the problem of the image and its prototype. (3) The iconoclasts proposed the eucharist as the only real image of the Word of God incarnate. In order to be identical with the divine model, the image had to be "consubstantial" with the divine prototype. A painted image of God thus became an idol because it claimed "to be God." The Orthodox easily answered that according to Holy Tradition, the image did not claim to be identical with its divine model. The only identification of the image with its prototype was seen in the Trinity itself where the Son and the Spirit are images consubstantial with the Father. On the contrary, material images supposed an essential difference between the model and the prototype; the latter was only an inferior reflection. As for the eucharist, the Orthodox noted that it was not an im-

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3. Meyendorff, pp. 180-92.

age but the very reality, the truth itself. (4)

The Orthodox and the Liturgical Veneration of the Icon

This conception of the image also imposed a fundamental distinction in the forms of the liturgical veneration of images. It was a distinction that we find in the writings of St. John of Damascus and especially in St. Theodore the Studite, a distinction which was later on to become part of the definition of the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. (5) "Worship" in its strictest sense *latria, latreiotike proskynesis* was reserved for God only. What was offered to the icons, as well as to the Virgin and the saints, was called "relative veneration" *proskynesis schetike* or "honorific veneration," *timetike proskynesis. Latria* was never offered to the image itself; it was offered, however, through the image to the person represented since, by its essence, the image had only a relative reality. It was always an image of a person and not the person himself. Nonetheless, when veneration was offered to the image of Christ, that veneration became worship, not of the image but of Christ, because he who was represented was the Word of God. (6) This distinction was important for the liturgical veneration of images because it underlined the essential difference between the reality of the image and that of the prototype, the Word of God, and through him the reality of the saints who participate in his glory. Furthermore the distinction *latria/proskynesis*, worship/veneration, protected the image against the accusation of idolatry and protected it from abuses which have threatened it in every age.

The Prototype and the Hypostasis (person)

The Orthodox, however, were confronted with another problem, that of the prototype itself. According to the iconoclasts, the humanity of Christ was just as "indescribable" as the divinity, for the Word assumed "man, humanity, in general" *katholou anthropos.* As the New Adam, Christ contained in himself the whole of the renewed human nature. Even if the Orthodox agreed with the

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4. St. John of Damascus, pp. 13-22 (P.G. 94, col. 1240-44; 1337-48).

5. Mansi, t. 13, 1902, col. 377.

6. Meyendorff, p. 184: '...St. Thomas Aquinas himself admitted a 'relative adoration' (latria) of the images, and this provoked accusations of idolatry against the Latin Church by certain Orthodox and later by the Reformers of the sixteenth century.'

iconoclasts on the impossibility of representing God in himself, they rejected the iconoclastic conception of Christ's humanity since it once again called into question the hypostatic union. St. Nicephorus, Patriarch of Constantinople, and St. Theodore the Studite were the two theologians who addressed this problem, each in a different way. St. Nicephorus, being a good logician, first of all distinguished between "circumscription" and "resemblance." He thus showed that the term "circumscription," *perigraphe*, could not be a constituent element of the image. A thing could be circumscribed according to place, time, forms, and even understanding. Circumscription, therefore, had to do with the realm of ideas. The image, on the other hand, had to do with visible similarity to the prototype. St. Nicephorus thus developed a very realistic conception of painting and was able to ask this question: "Did Christ have a visible aspect that we can represent?" This question has received a unanimously positive answer in subsequent history. Using facts from the gospels, St. Nicephorus showed that the body of Christ could be seen and recognized. It kept its visible and identifiable resemblance, even after the resurrection.

St. Theodore's argumentation centered on the following paradox: "The Invisible One became visible." (7) This sentence means that the invisible Word of God, born from the Invisible Father, appeared and became visible to our eyes. It means that we have seen the very person of the Word of God, his hypostasis. (8) The icon of Christ, therefore, did not represent just his nature but his hypostasis, his person.

> *For how could a nature be portrayed unless it were contemplated in a hypostasis? For example, Peter is not portrayed insofar as he is animate, rational, mortal, and capable of thought and understanding; for this does not define Peter only, but also Paul and John, and all those of the same species. But insofar as he adds along with the common definition certain properties...he is distinguished from the other individuals of the same species. (9)*

In the same way, the Word when he became flesh took on human nature and since this nature did not exist except in individuals, the Word did not become man in general but a specific man, the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. And having shown that individual traits belong to the person and not to the nature, St. Theodore was able to confirm that the

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7. *Antirrheterics*, P.G. 99, col. 332.

8. Christoph von Schoenborn, *L'icône du Christ*, Editions universitaires, Fribourg-en-Suisse, 1976, p.218.

9. St. Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Cestwood, NY, 1981, 34, p. 90.

features of Jesus' face were the features of the divine person. Right here St. Theodore touched the heart of the iconoclastic doctrine. Up to this time, theologians had skirted the issue as though it were a scandal. St. Theodore was the first person to confirm the paradox of the incarnation:

> *But if He assumed humanity in truth, as we confess, then the hypostasis of Christ is circumscribable: not according to its divinity, which no one has ever beheld, but according to the humanity which is contemplated in an individual manner in it. (10)*

Thus we can really say that the icon circumscribes the Word of God for the Word circumscribed himself by becoming man. (11)

In this conception of the hypostasis (person), St. Nicephorus' distinction between circumscription and similarity became inoperative. For St. Nicephorus, circumscription was an inherent quality of every nature; for St. Theodore, it was the sum total of the distinctive features which distinguished one person from another. These features were certainly tied to the human nature of an individual, but they became the expression of the irreducible individuality of the person. Concretely, the person who painted also circumscribed, however he did not circumscribe the nature but the person who was represented in the image.

Prototype and Presence

On the basis of the preceding explanation, St. Theodore was able to provide the answer to the final question dealing with the essence of the icon: In what way is the prototype present in the icon? Without being afraid of the emanation theory of a Platonic philosophy, St. Theodore could say the following:

> *The prototype is not essentially in the image. If it were, the image would be called prototype, as conversely the prototype would be called image. This is not admissible, because the nature of each has its own definition. Rather, the prototype is in the image by the similarity of hypostasis... (12)*

He even went so far as to say that Christ and the icon had

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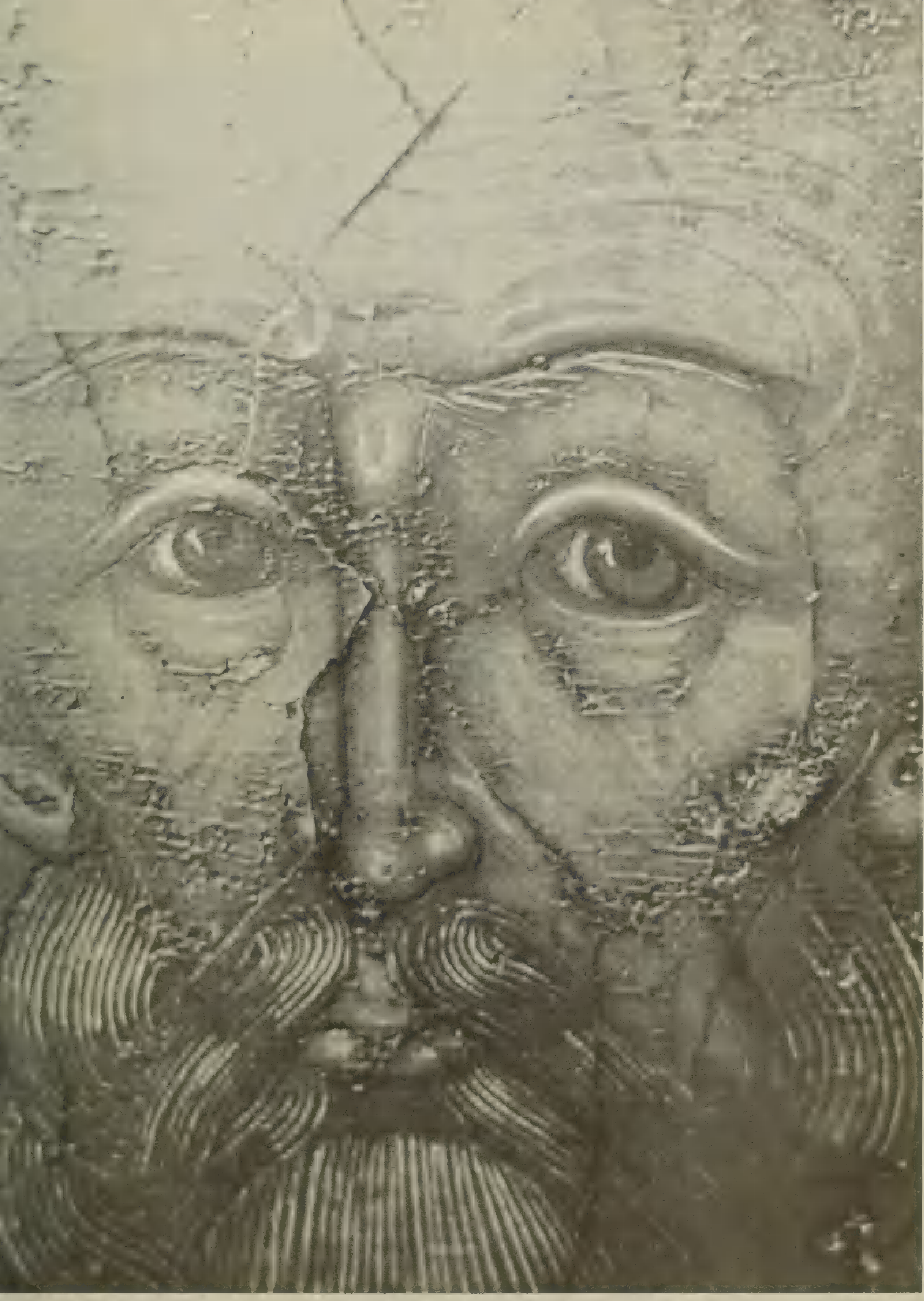
10. *Ibid., p. 87.*

11. *On Byzantine icons of Christ, the Greek words ho ön*, 'he who is,' are written in the cross of the halo so as to indicate the person of the Word of God incarnate.

12. St. Theodore, p. 102.



St. John: *Russian Icon, 18th c. (private collection).*

the same hypostasis. Thus the conception of St. Theodore differed from that of St. John of Damascus who said that "it is as though the icon is filled with energy and grace." This expression was not without its ambiguities and was open to the danger of fetishism, but it stated in a metaphorical way that the body of Christ communicated its holiness to other material objects. The icon would then participate essentially in the body of Christ and thus would be very close to the sacraments. In fact, certain fanatics on the side of the Orthodox considered icons to be superior to sacraments. These people went so far as to add fragments of paint from icons to the Holy Gifts in the chalice! This practice has obviously been condemned by the Orthodox Church.

The governing principle of St. Theodore's theology was, in contrast to the above, the personalism of patristic theology. Personalism could not accept an energy as a mode of personal presence since an energy, according to the Orthodox position, always belonged to a nature and not to a person. A divine energy would therefore sanctify the icon in a natural way. As a consequence, this would imply that even a decayed board could contain a presence. Nonetheless, St. Theodore, like St. Germanus before him, did not hesitate to burn such an icon as a useless piece of wood. (13) There was therefore no energy present but rather the presence of the hypostasis-person, expressed by the characteristic features of the prototype.

In order to describe the mode of this presence, St. Theodore had recourse to the image of a seal and its imprint:

> *As an example, let us take a ring on which the image of the emperor is carved. Whether we make an impression with the ring in wax, pitch, or clay, the seal remains exactly the same in each form of matter though each one of them is different from the other. However, the seal itself is in fact separate from the forms of matter and remains in the ring. In the same way, the likeness of Christ, though it may be carved into whatever material substance, has no communion with that substance in which it is expressed. It remains in the hypostasis-person of Christ to which it properly belongs. (14)*

Without despising matter, St. Theodore accented the mode of hypostatic presence in the icon. For him the icon did not belong to the sacramental realm. The material substance of the sacraments received its sanctifying force by an instrumental grace (in baptism, water sanctified a person by the force of the Holy Spirit). The icon did not give a person substantial participation in Christ as did the eucharistic

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13. St. Theodore, P.G. 99, col. 344.
14. St. Theodore the Studite, *Letter to Plato*, P.G. 99, col, 504-5.

bread which *is* the body of Christ. The icon allowed the participation in Christ by its relation to the hypostasis (person) of Christ, and this participation was of an intentional nature. Thus the icon must be recognized as the image of a definite person and must carry his name. The icon was an intentional, deliberate communion with the person represented.

With St. Theodore the Studite, the theology of the icon reached its perfection. It is surprising that it took more than a century to arrive at a theological statement that was able to give a satisfying answer to iconoclasm.

The Final Refutation of Iconoclasm

Among the iconoclasts, there was also an evolution in thinking. During the first phase of the struggle, the Orthodox had to confront a rather rudimentary iconoclastic theology. This state of affairs changed, however, with the theological work of the emperor Constantine V Copronymus and the Synod of Hieria in 754. In this period, the Orthodox were satisfied to repeat the arguments of St. John of Damascus. There was no attempt to answer the arguments of the emperor. The violence of the persecutions can no doubt explain this silence. But there was also another reason: outside the Byzantine world, the only known texts were those written under the influence of St. John. Thus the two adversaries found thenselves at different levels. The acts of Nicaea II (787) reflected this situation. Later on, however, at the death of St. Theodore (826) when Orthodoxy was about to achieve its definitive victory (843), these acts were solemnly reconfirmed since there was simply no time to prepare a profound theological statement, as at Nicaea II. Let us now look at the final statement of this council, the horos:

> ...we decide in all correctness and after a thorough examination, that just as the holy and vivifying cross, similarly the holy and precious icons painted with colors, made with little stones or with any other matter serving this purpose, should be placed in the holy churches of God, on liturgical vessels and sacred vestments, on walls and boards, in houses and on roads, whether these are icons of our Lord God and Savior, Jesus Christ, or our spotless Sovereign Lady, the holy Mother of God, or the holy angels and holy and leave as is men. For each time that we see their representation in an image, each time, while gazing upon them, we are made to remember the prototypes, we grow to love them more, and we are even more induced to venerate them and by witnessing our veneration, not the

> true adoration which, according to our faith, is proper only to the one divine nature, but in the same way as we venerate the image of the precious and vivifying cross, the holy Gospel and other sacred objects which we honor with incense and candles according to the pious custom of our forefathers. For the honor rendered to the image goes to its prototype, and the person who venerates an icon, venerates the person represented on it.
>
> Thus, we decide that those who dare to think or teach differently, following the example of the evil heretics; those who dare to scorn the ecclesiastical traditions, to make innovations or to repudiate something which has been sanctified by the Church, whether the Gospel or the representation of the cross, or the painting of icons, or the sacred relics of martyrs, or who have evil, pernicious and subversive feelings towards the traditions of the catholic Church; those, finally, who dare give sacred vessels or venerable monasteries to ordinary uses, we decide that, if they are bishops or priests, they be defrocked; if they are monks or laymen, they be excommunicated. (15)

There is something very surprising in this conciliar document which expressed the faith of the Church, even though there is no formal dogmatic definition (16): we have in the horos only a weak reflection of the theology of the icon. First of all, the text dealt with the liturgical veneration of icons. The council recommended that icons be placed everywhere that the faithful lived. The material substance of the icons and the technique of the fabrication was not important. The document then gave the justification for the veneration of icons: the image was the object of contemplation for the faithful. By looking at the images, the people received the teaching of the heros of the faith ad were moved by the images to imitate the saints. (See plate 9) The outward expression of this inward attitude was the veneration of images which was fundamentally different from worship which belongs to God alone. And even the veneration of the image does not stop at the painted representation but passes beyond it to the model, the prototype, in another dimension, God's dimension.

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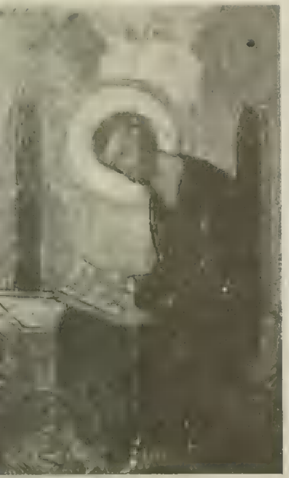
15. Gervais Dumeige, *La foi catholique*, L'Orante, Paris, 1969, pp. 319-20, quoting St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, P.G. 32, col. 149.

16. Serge Boulgakov, *Ikonai ikonapocitanie, YMCA, Paris, 1931, p. 610.*



St. Mark.

The last paragraph enumerated the acts which attacked the dignity of images and defined the canonical punishments for those who refused the council's decisions. In addition, in this document as in that of the fourth council of Constantinople (17), which in 870 was once again to confirm the doctrine of the holy images set out at Nicaea II, the first place was given to the holy cross, symbol of the Christ's passion and of our salvation. Next followed the gospel which is the presence of the living Word of God in the Church and then in third place came the icons.

This was how the doctrine of the Church concerning the holy images was presented. Much of the doctrinal richness developed by the great Byzantine theologians was not incorporated into these definitions that were often as disciplinary in nature as dogmatic. This was often the case in a polemical environment, in a crisis situation. But in its wisdom, the Church left open the door to a deepening of the research into the meaning of the icon and its more perfect formulation. This research will be fruitful if, in setting forth the traditional doctrine, it is carried out under the action of the Holy Spirit in faithfulness to the letter as well as to the spirit of the dogmatic truths that the Church acquired at the cost of great suffering and effort: the martyrdom of many of its children and the difficult theological discernment on the part of the holy doctors and fathers of the Church.

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17. Dumeige, pp. 320-1. .ul

Chapter 3

The Byzantine Language

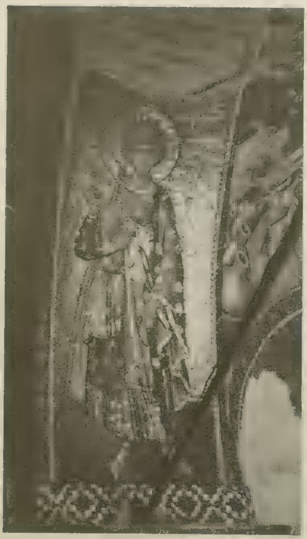
The long struggle in defense of the sacred image has led us into a necessarily polemical presentation, into a controversy of an essentially theological nature. We need to complete this picture, even correct it, with a less agitated, calmer examination: one which allows us to get inside the structures of Byzantine society. If, as is certainly the case, the icon is a reality whose origins are fundamentally theological, it is also the case that the icon has been conditioned by the world and the society which gave it birth. Once we are aware of this latter point, we can then understand the vision of the world proper to this society; we can make a catalogue of the literary forms in which Byzantine society chose to express itself. Having done all this, we can then set the icon in its own world.

The Byzantine Society

These presuppositions lead us to our main question: What was the form of Byzantine society? What was its specific character and how did the historical forces of the Byzantine world, its philosophical and theological conceptions express themselves in figurative art and especially in the icon? Let us first of all examine Byzantine society which developed this art and then the religious and philosophical conceptions which were expressed in iconography.

When Constantine founded the new capital of his empire in 330, he could not have foreseen the magnitude of the success which, two centuries later, this city was to achieve. It was the most important cultural center of Europe for one thousand years. In this city, highly priviledged by its political and economic position, the cultures of East and West met together thus contributing to the formation of a new culture which had its origins in a declining Hellenism, in Roman culture, and in a Christian vision of the world. What was surprising in this whole process is that Byzantium assimilated these very diverse elements and thus renewed the artistic language of antiquity by putting it on a new foundation.

The Christian East played a decisive role in this evolution. The result was a culture of rare organic unity, even monolithic in nature. What stands out as a characteristic of Byzantine culture is that it evolved with continuity, without interruption, and in a linear fashion, periodically renewing itself from its Hellenistic sources. In large part, the steady, permanent, and long evolution of Byzantium was due to the capital city, Constantinople, and to its social and religious life.



A Holy Martyr.

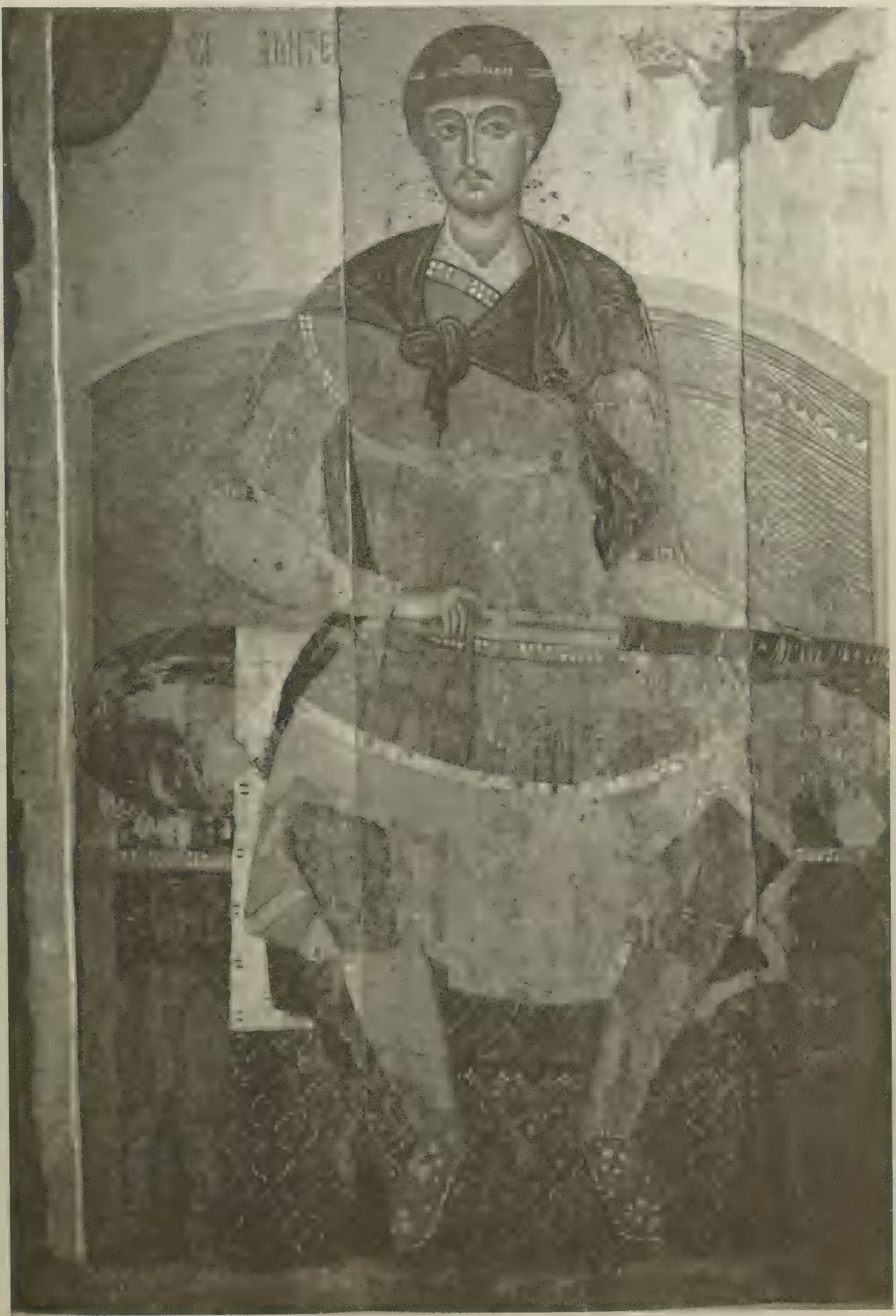
The Aristocracy

The society of this city was dominated by an aristocracy of landowners, the court nobles, the high officials of the civil service, and the clergy.

The rich landowners unquestionably played a dominant role in the empire; and thanks to their fabulous wealth, their importance and their power never stopped growing. Thus, in the 11th century, this aristocracy held the key positions in the civil service and in the army, forming a veritable oligarchy. Its members were even capable of deposing the emperors themselves. (See plate 7)

As nobles born to their stations, they were dearly attached to old traditions and proudly considered themselves to be the descendents of the Roman empire. They also scorned other peoples as barbarians. As they were used to the solemnities of Hagia Sophia and to court festivities, they evolved in a world of wealth, intelligence, ease and gentility of speech, initiative, as well as of courage and physical beauty. It was in this society that the veneration of martyrs took on a special form: the rich decoration of their military armor and the refinement of their clothes on the frescoes and icons showed that the martyrs were not just the great heros of the faith but also the shining models which inspired this society and through which the society molded its identity.

The upper civil servants formed another important class in the society of Constantinople. These men were educated in a brilliant culture and capable of expressing every nuance of their thinking; they had solid training in ancient rhetoric, and they formed the upper echelons of the famous Byzantine diplomatic corps. In their ranks, however, we know that there were intellectuals and writers who developed the political theory of imperial power and even participated in theological debates.



St. Dimitrius: *Yaroslavl School, 13th c. (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow).*

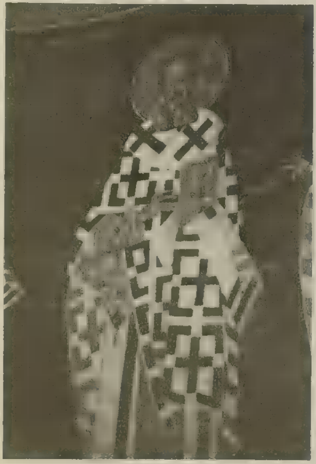
The Church

Intimately related to this illustrious aristocracy, we have the high clergy. Quite often, these Church officials came from court circles and were part of the intellectual elite of their time. Thanks to these prelates, the Church of Constantinople had an organization of great efficiency which stretched out even to the most distant provinces, and many times the Church was able to defend its interests even against the emperor.

Among these Churchmen, many were men of God and hierarchs whose lives of prayer and ascesis were apparent to everyone. The richness and depth of their thought made them famous even outside the limits of the empire. Many of the venerated doctors of the universal Church held a position in Constantinople. Their spiritual grandeur was reflected in the apsidal frescoes which we so greatly admire in the churches of Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Russia. Dressed in their liturgical vestments of black crosses on a white background, the *polystavrion*, these figures express the glory and passion of the Lord. These men remain witnesses even today of the mysteries of God incarnate. (See plate 8)

The numerous monasteries of the capital were not simply places of prayer and ascesis. They were also centers of culture and science. As in the case of the most famous of these centers, the Studion, they were also hotbeds of protest, or if one prefers, reform. During the period of iconoclasm, they were centers of resistance against that heresy, and in order to defend the veneration of icons, hundreds of monks gave their lives as martyrs.

Other movements, like hesychasm, also had their origin in the monasteries, but it would be a distortion to imagine that the monastic communities were, with their important libraries, only great scholarly centers having no contacts with life. The monks belonged to all social classes. Those of the most humble origins lived side by side with descendants of the great families. The monks came from every region of the empire, and this made them open to new ideas even if such ideas were not always in agreement with official doctrine. Nonetheless, these monasteries were able to produce great spiritual masters, numerous bishops, and even patriarchs.

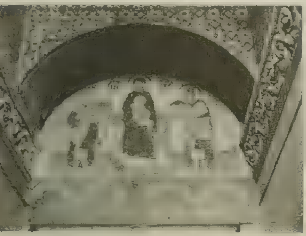

St. Gregory Nazianzus.

Also, thanks to newly built monasteries, the monasticism of the capital reached to the farthest limits of eastern Christianity. These monks, such as we find them painted on the walls of churches and on icons, reflected a life that was governed by an unconditional ascesis and by an interior concentration which tended, even on earth, toward the uncreated light of God. We see these same faces, purified by fasting and vigil in the caves of Cyprus and in northern Russia.

The Emperor

At the very top of the Byzantine hierarchy was the emperor. Owing to the centralized organization of the empire and to its revenue, the emperor had unlimited riches at his disposal. This seems to be the interpretation we should give to the answer of the Byzantine court to the emperor Otto I when he threatened Byzantium with reprisals: "With the gold which is in our hands, we will raise up all the peoples of the earth against you. We will break you like an earthen vase..." The sultan of Ikonia, blinded by the treasures of the palace, declared that he would have already broken every adversary if he had possessed such riches. The descriptions of the palace and the court ceremony give us an idea of the power of the Byzantine emperor.

This economic power was based on the religious idea of the state, that is the organic union of secular and religious power. Their "symphony", to use the traditional Byzantine term, was the basic and original feature of the Byzantine state in which the organic union of the two sacralized powers was pushed farther than in any other country of Europe. Despite those who criticized the court, the revolts, and even the assassinations, the emperor was, and remained, a sacred person.



The Theotokos between Constantine and Justinian.

Byzantium was a reflection of the Kingdom of God on earth. Nicephorus Blemmydes (1) understood the empire in terms of a living body whose head was formed by the emperor and the patriarch. However, the border between the representatives of the two powers was not always clearly defined. The emperor's authority was not limited to the affairs of the empire. In the solemn processions which he led during the great celebrations in Hagia Sophia, the emperor appeared to the people as a priest-king, so blinding was his splendor. He was acclaimed "equal-to-the-Apostles" and a second David. Leo III the Isaurian, the first iconoclastic emperor, even wrote to Pope Gregory II "I am priest and king." However unclear the boundary was between emperor and patriarch, this statement was an obvious overstepping of the line.

This arrangement did not lack for ambiguities. In the liturgical realm, the emperor remained a faithful layman, submissive to the Church and to the patriarch. Even if he had the right to enter the sanctuary, he could not touch the altar like the clergy, and he received communion after the deacons. He was nonetheless the first among the faithful laity of the Church. His face was to be constantly turned toward God since the Lord himself elected him to guide the people in

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1. *Discourse on the Duties of the King*, P.G. 142, col. 648-74.

living peaceful lives. In contrast the people had to obey the emperor since, in theory, he only did God's will. This is how we should understand the Byzantine custom of putting an icon on the triumphal chariot driven by the emperor after a victory. This gesture expressed the fundamental conviction which animated Byzantine civilization: the will of God was accomplished in all things, and the emperor was God's instrument for the accomplishment of that will. (See plate 6)

The pomp of this prestigious Constantinopolitan world found its expression in imperial art. Byzantine art was attached to the Roman tradition but at the same time was affected by various oriental influences. Its uniqueness lay, however, in the fact that it renewed the out-dated pagan formulas of classical art through Christian symbolism. The image of the "basileus" shows this evolution. The imperial conqueror who affirmed his power among men was transformed, especially after iconoclasm, into a sovereign whose characteristics were Orthodoxy and piety. The whole of imperial art came out of the palace and exercised a great influence on the whole of religious art.

According to André Grabar, the artists who were charged with painting Christian subjects took their inspiration from models that they found in the art of the palace. This was especially the case with the artists of the first centuries of the Christian empire. These artists were favored by the views of certain theologians, and taking into account the close relations of the symbolic themes, they often used the familiar images of imperial art. Following these models they created a series of symbolic compositions of Christ, the sovereign of the universe and conqueror death. (2)

We can see then that the pantocrators of Byzantine cupolas carry the imprint of this cultural environment, but the religious element was destined to be more and more determinant in its evolution.

If the Christ of Daphni is the sovereign who affirms his power over the world, the art of the following centuries was to be preoccupied with giving Christ a more spiritual, a more evangelical look. The result was to be the Savior of Rublev who invites men to believe in his goodness and his mercy. The influence of imperial art was not limited to the representation of Christ. In his authoritative study, André Grabar set out other elements of court ceremony that were reflected in the themes of the major feasts of the liturgical year. The

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2. Grabar, *L'empereur dans l'art byzatin, p. 266.*

Byzantine genius assimilated them and thus gave them a theological meaning.

The Religious Vision

However, to consider Byzantine art as only the reflection of Byzantine civilization and its sociological and political forms would in fact mean to pass over in silence its most profound sources: its spirituality and its religious and philosophical vision of the world. And if this civilization, which was born in Byzantium, served as a model for the newly formed states of Eastern Europe, including Russia, then Byzantine civilization implies first and foremost the heritage of the religious ideas of Orthodoxy.

It was certainly true that the Byzantine Church, like the Church of the West, based itself on the biblical tradition, the doctrine of the first councils, and the theology of the Greek Fathers. However, from the 5th century on, this Byzantine Church differed considerably from the other patriarchates and local Churches.

First of all, and despite many conflicts, the Church of Constantinople saw itself as the Church of the empire, and that empire saw itself as the Kingdom of God on earth. Thus it was natural for the Byzantines to interpret as treason the efforts of the Roman Church to claim for itself a divine right in the succession of Peter. We would be led too far astray, however, if we were to enter into the dogmatic differences and to try to discover their repercussions on art. What we are interested in, though are the ideas or attitudes that were expressed in Byzantine art and which give us specific indications about its character. Even though during the Middle Ages both the Christian East and West held in common the basic values of the Christian world, it is still a fitting exercise to try to specify the characteristics of the Byzantine world.

The vision of the world as conceived in Byzantium had its origins in the Holy Scriptures, but this vision was interpreted in terms of a philosophy that owed much to Neoplatonism and especially to Plotinus. From this point of view, the universe was made up of two separate worlds: the world of the senses and the world of the intellect.

In the beginning, there was the intelligible world in which perfect harmony reigned. Every material object found its perfect model in the ideas, that is in the thoughts of the Creator God. For his part, man participated in both worlds. His sensible nature was tied to the material world and his intelligible nature, the soul, to the world of ideas. This soul, on the other hand, was darkened by its contact with matter. The final goal of life was thus to conquer the sensible world and to get out of the condition of sin. God was considered to be a sovereign king situated at the top of an endless hierarchy. Man, held by the fear of sin and death, had to put all his hope in eternal life.

Contemplation and Ascesis

According to this conception of the world, the mystery of the incarnation took on a particular and specific meaning. By the incarnation, sin and death were not only conquered, but man was raised toward God, more than any other creature. According to St. Athanasius, "God became man so that man might become god." (3) Thus the body, which Plato had defined as the tomb of the soul, became the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Nonetheless, the pagan dualism was not eradicated. Despite its rehabilitation by the incarnation, the sensible world remained hostile territory. Sin and death weighed heavily on the conscience of man, even on those who led an exemplary life. The only path toward the Kingdom of Heaven was faith in Christ, imitating him by prayer and ascesis. By faith, the door of the sensible world opened toward the intelligible world, and communication between the two became possible.

We understand then the importance of contemplation with ascesis as a preparation for this contemplation. The sensible nature must free itself from every attachment to the world and sin, as from every exterior influence. It must plunge into the mystic night and attain divine illumination.

> *We were not born to eat and drink but to shine by our virtues in the glory of our Creator. We eat out of necessity so as to preserve our strength for contemplation for which we were really born. (4)*

And now we can see the importance of the monastic movement. Among the ascetics, we find members of the great families and even emperors like Nicephorus Phocas and Michael IV and the empress Theophana. In the 14th and 15th centuries, there were about 180,000 monks and nuns living in the many monasteries of the empire. It was not by chance then that the first icons were not those of Christ but images of the stylites who were "the earthly forms of angels."

Thus only after having recalled the important place given to contemplation can we talk about the Byzantine liturgical life and grasp its importance and its characteristics.

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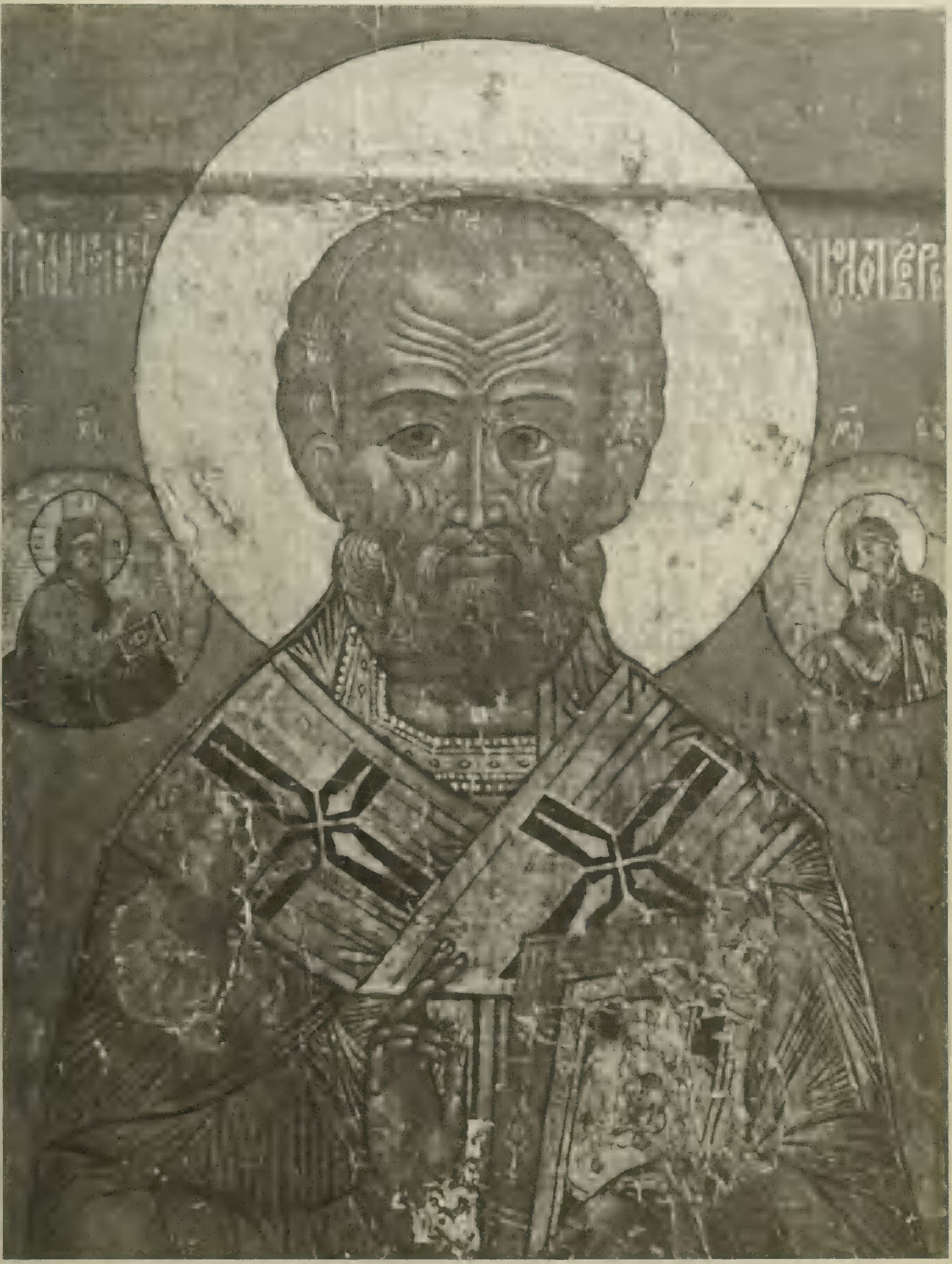
3. *Letters*, P.G. 26, col. 1411.

4. Nicephorus Blemmydes, *Epistola universalior et ad multos (Letter Written for a Wider Public)*, P.G. 142, col. 608.



St. Nicholas: *Russian icon, beginning of the 18th c. (private collection).*

The Liturgical Life

In the liturgy, the soul was elevated toward the transcendence of God. The beauty of the paintings and the decorations, the expressiveness of the chanting, the solemnity of the rites, all this came together to engulf man in the presence of mystery. Each gesture, each symbol was already a presence of the eternal.

The liturgy was above all a celebration before the throne of the King of Heaven. Its other aspects, such as instruction or the participation of the faithful were subordinated to this primary function. Thus, during the liturgy, the celebrants symbolized the heavenly hierarchy: "Let us who mystically represent the cherubim and who sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-creating Trinity, now lay aside all earthly cares." (the cherubic hymn at the great entrance). This conception of the liturgy led to a rather strange phenomenon which was still known in 17th century Russia: mnogoglassy (5), the celebration of several services in the same church at the same time. The result was that the language of these services took on the character of speaking in tongues and became esoteric due to deformations in pronunciation. What was important was the doing of the service before the throne of God. Everything had to be done so as to contribute to His glory. The impressiveness of the liturgy thus did not fail to touch foreigners. St. Vladimir's ambassadors from Kiev were dumbfounded by the beauty of the liturgy in Hagia Sophia: "we did not know if we were in heaven or on earth..."

In this world of blinding material richness, spiritual forces were destined to play an even greater role, operating with greater force in elevating man toward the beauty of the intelligible world, toward God.

In this relative harmony of material richness and spiritual life, art had a primordial position. The function of the image was to make the world of God's glory visible and to transform this world into a vision of the Kingdom of God. "Through the visible image, our thoughts must launch themselves by a spiritual flight toward the invisible grandeur of divinitiy." (6)

The Image

A western Christian might well ask why the Byzantines were so fascinated by the image. This fascination could certainly be explained by the place of the image in Greek antiquity as well as by polemical motivations which had their part to play after the iconoclastic crisis. But it was the

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5. Boris Ouspensky, "Semiotika ikony" ("The Semantics of the Icon") *Russia*, t. 3, Einaudi, Turin, 1977, p. 203.

6. Mansi, t. 12, col. 1061.

theology of the incarnation that gave to the image its original face in the Byzantine Church.

Thus for one thousand years, the primary preoccupation of Byzantine art was the spiritualization of forms and subjects. This art did not seek to represent the passing event but rather the religious idea, the truth of faith. These paintings were not the personal meditations of individual artists but theology written in images. This was why the iconographer was under the guidance of the ecclesiastical authorities. He was only an interpreter and his name did not appear on icons until a much later period. This lack of emphasis on artistic creativity did not, however, lower artistic quality or inhibit the search for new forms or the introduction of new forms. These creations though always remained within the framework of the Church's doctrine, and close attention was paid to the works by the bishops, as we see in the canons of the councils and the synods.

The iconographic tradition found its definitive form after iconoclasm, in the 9th century. In the theology of the image, form became one of its fundamental principles thanks to the doctrine of the prototype. Thus each icon was a faithful interpretation of the prototype (see chapter 1 on "The Genesis of the Icon"). Even though portrait features of a saint were by no means excluded, the icon represented the saint in his or her spiritual dimension. Thus the face of St. Peter showed his characteristic features as known from the gospels, and he was clearly distinguishable from St. Paul or St. Andrew.

Descriptions of the saints were transmitted by oral tradition which was very much alive during the first centuries. We find these descriptions first in the liturgical books and later in the painters' manuals. Western art also preserved the saints' characteristic features, but it interpreted them more liberally because it was not tied to Byzantine theology.

For many saints, we do not know how their iconic features came to be fixed, and in these cases, it was their specific type of holiness which gave their icons a spiritual reality. The numerous martyrs formed a special category in the hierarchy of saints, each with his typical colors and gestures, for all of them gave their lives as witnesses. Thus their individual characters were absorbed by the theological idea which was the essential aspect of their existence. This was true, par excellence, for the icons of Christ and the Virgin. Christ was above all the Logos who became man for our salvation. His attributes, the gesture of benediction, the book, the colors of his clothes, and above all the halo with the inscription "I am He who is": all this expressed the mystery of the Pantocrator, the God-man and governor of the universe.

The fidelity of Byzantine painting to Greek anthropology was not due only to Hellenistic influence. It was also a consequence of the theology of the incarnation. In Christ and his saints, full and complete humanity has been realized. This humanity was more than symbolic since a symbol can only express an abstract idea.

In fact, the ancient image of man was radically transformed. Because the icon sought to spiritualize the world, the image of physical beauty was quite unsuited to express the new man in Christ. Everything that recalled the sensible world thus had to be transfigured. In Hellenistic art, which specialized in sculpture, the torso was the most significant part of the body. In Byzantine art, however, the human body lost its naturalistic look. The bodies of the ascetics, reduced by fasting, and even the body of Christ in baptism, could thus be shown nude without shocking the sensibilities of the faithful. What was more generally the case, however, was that the body disappeared under the person's clothes, and fine lines gave it an irrational and abstract impression.

The pink skin-tones of antiquity gave place to shades of ochre, yellow-brown and red. The heat of the body became the heat of the spirit. Refusing to give the illusion of a body in a natural space, the modeling of the body served to evoke the inner nature. And behind these rather dark shades, there shone a light, like rays of an interior sun which by a series of fine hatching lines gave the impression of an intense life. Thus the parts of the face were also spiritualized because, according to John Mauropous (7), a good artist ought not only to represent the body but also the soul. All attention was concentrated on the look of the person represented, a look which radiated out towards the spectator. (See plate 30) In the early period, the large open eyes, larger than life, fascinated and seemed to absorb the spectator, but later after the iconoclastic era, the icon appeared to find a certain balance between the human and the divine. This was especially true in Russian icons, starting in the 14th century when the look became softer without losing any of its firmness. Might this not be an expression of the hesychastic movement which became a new force in Orthodox religious life in Russia as well?

From that time on, the iconographic type of the Saviour with a fierce appearance lost its hostile look and became "the lover of man" of the liturgical texts, while still keeping the basic character of the composition.

The forehead, identified as the seat of wisdom, rose above the arches which encircled the eyes and strengthened the ex-

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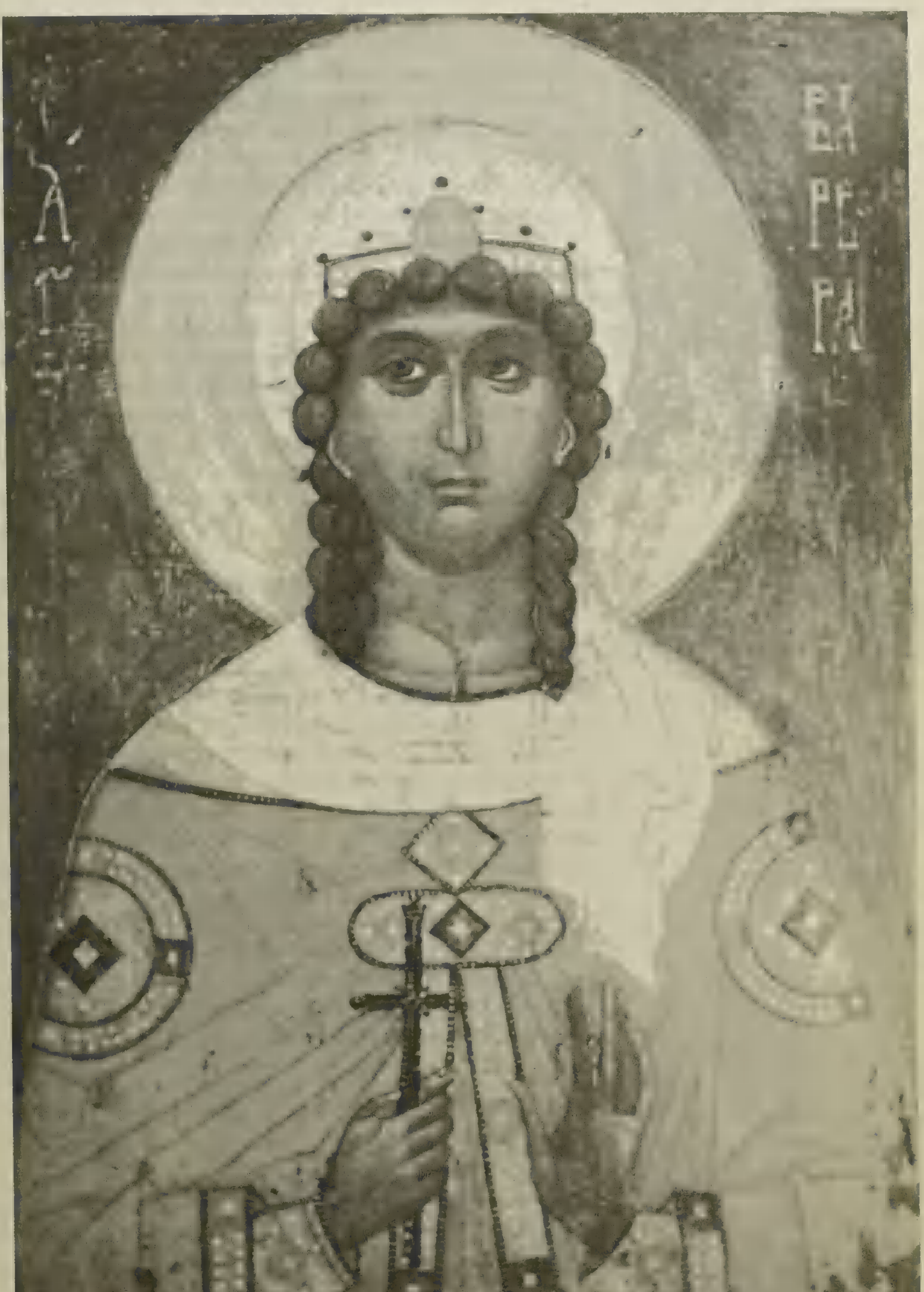
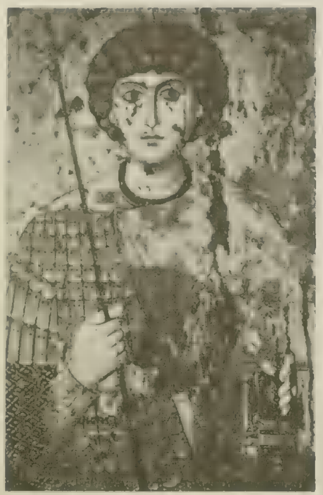
7. John Mauropous or D'Euchaita, *Vers iambiques*, P.G. 120, col. 1174, verses 1555-8.



St. Barbara: *Russian icon,*
15th c.

pression of the gaze. The forehead was often very high and convex and expressed the power of the spirit. (8) The nose having its roots in the forehead was often elongated. This feature gave the faces their great nobility. At the end of the nose, the nostrils, without heaviness, seemed to vibrate with the movement of the Spirit thus expressing the saint's passion for God. Neither too convex nor too flat, the cheeks harmoniously encircled the mouth. Only the cheeks of ascetics, monks, and bishops showed deep wrinkles; these were evidence of fasting and long prayer vigils.



St. George.

The mouth, being the most sensual part of the face, was always very thin often being drawn geometrically; it was always closed in the silence of contemplation. St. John the Evangelist was shown putting his finger in front of his mouth because in the world of glory, everything is vision. It is significant that even the saints around the throne of Christ, despite the indication of Holy Scripture, were represented with closed mouths. In the West, on the other hand, Fra Angelico showed the angels singing.

The movement of the face came to an end in an energetic, though not headstrong, chin; this feature was evident in a beard that fell in the rhythm of its locks.

The head was always encircled by a halo, the symbol of God's glory which brought about the person's spiritualization.

This spiritualizing tendency is seen even more clearly in the details of the icon. Despite fluctuations in certain periods, Byzantine art avoided the representation of nature as we see it in this world. Thus the rocks of the countryside appeared to be weightless. Buildings were often shown very sumptuously, but they and the objects in and around them were not subordinated to natural space. They often had their own individual type of perspective. In the same way, colors were not those of nature but had a meaning of their own and were integrated into the requirements of the composition. Everything was penetrated by a light which cast no shadows. This light was the divine light which was communicated through the celestial and terrestrial hierarchies so as to be reflected, in the final degree, in the material substance of the icon.

The Image and Reality

These features of Byzantine art force a question on us: Did the people of the Middle Ages identify this art with the reality in which they lived? It is quite probable that they saw things

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8. Olivier Clement, *Le visage interieur*, Stock, Paris, pp. 13-5.

in nature as we see them today. We therefore have to search for the reasons behind these particular forms of Byzantine art not in the observation of nature but in the ideas that gave rise to the stylization. In fact, starting with the first centuries, religious art increasingly renounced the earthly beauty of antiquity and created its own new forms. Thus after an evolution of several centuries, we see the emergence of the iconographic world of Byzantium. The forces at work in this ancient evolution were the religious and philosophical ideas of the age. At the same time, these forces prepared the faithful to see true reality in the image, that reality which was beyond all passing appearances.

Thus despite the erudition and the interest of the Byzantines in the sciences, the question of the correspondance between nature and art was never asked because the purpose of the image was to represent eternal truths and not give the illusion of reproducing nature. To express the mysterious character of these truths, the icon also had to make use of a language of mystery, a language different from that of our world.

Chapter 4

Icons and Literary Types

When we speak of an iconographer and his work, in Greek as in Slavonic, we do not say "paint" an icon but "write" an icon. Even if the meaning of the Greek word *graphein* was in itself wider in meaning than the Russian word *pisat'*, the two terms expressed very clearly the idea that iconography is analogous to writing, even identical. As with the written word, the icon teaches Christian truth: it is a theology in images. It is thus not surprising to note that various literary genres have influenced iconography. The didactic character was never absent from the icon even during the first centuries when the faithful saw the saint's presence in it. Very quickly, however, detailed descriptions appeared especially on those icons which represented a historical event, and then the style became narrative; it was only at a later time that this narrative style became dominant.

From what literary sources did icon painters get their inspiration? First of all, of course, the Holy Scriptures, but on this biblical foundation were added the apocryphal writings, liturgical and hagiographic texts, and the sermons of the fathers. Despite the variety of literary sources and their unequal value, the fundamental unity of iconography was not jeopardized; on the contrary, this diversity of sources gave birth to a great thematic richness which can still be found today in the whole of the Orthodox liturgy. It might seem surprising that Byzantine art assimilated certain elements and rejected others, but this filtration resulted in a unity that we still admire today.

So much for the background; what about the form? The icon took its inspiration from the dominant literary types of the time and thus conformed itself to their laws and structures. In these literary types, we discover the explanation of certain details of Byzantine painting which seem, at first glance, strange and even bizarre.

In his book on iconography, Konrad Onasch dedicated a large part of his research to these literary types through which the icon expressed itself. Onasch pointed out four basic models: 1) panegyric, 2) epic, 3) dramatic, and 4) dogmatic. (1)

In the first centuries, only certain elements of these models appeared in art. After iconoclasm, Church decoration found its definitive form, and these literary forms were fully developed in art. First of all, biblical scenes covered the church walls even to the saturation point as we see in Serbia, for example, at Decani. There we can count more than one thousand scenes. The churches of Romania also manifested this great richness. With time, however, the center of icon painting moved into Russia, and there, especially from the 16th century on, the icons of saints were divided into two sections: the middle and the edges. The main, central image was encircled with scenes of the saint's life, faithfully illustrating the events described by the hagiographers. In this study, we must limit ourselves to a few examples of such icons, but many others can be seen in any icon exhibition. We can thus become aware of the importance of this transformation.

The Panegyric Model

A *logos panegyrikos*, a "panegyric speech", was already in antiquity a speech that praised a great person. (2) Thus the Church also adopted this genre in sermons preached before martyrs' tombs or in churches consecrated to their memory, and these preachers showed themselves worthy imitators of the great orators of antiquity, their masters. We have a typical example in the panegyric sermon of St. Basil the Great in honor of the holy martyr Barlaam; we can also see the role that St. Basil assigned to the artist.

Come to my aid, you who can paint great events. By your art, complete the imperfect image of this army leader. Using paints and colors, make the victorious martyr shine, him whom I have described with such little brilliance. I would like to be bested by you in the painting of the martyr's valor. It would give me great pleasure today to be outdone by your talent. Show us a shining image of the wrestler. Show us the screaming demons for they are defeated today thanks to you, by the victories of the martyrs. Let them see once again this

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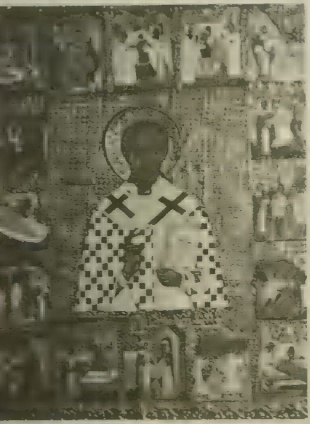
1. Konrad Onasch, *Die Ikonenmalerei*, Kochler-Amelang, Leipzig, 1968, pp. 151-91.

2. Primitively, the *panegyris* was an assembly of citizens or even of several cities; the theme of the speech given on the occasion dealt with the reason for the meeting or with something of common interest. Only later on did the theme of the speech deal with a *hero*, some great personality.

burning and victorious hand. And on your painting, do not forget to show Christ who presides over the battle and gives the victory. (3)

What is striking in this literary type is the flowery expressions and even a certain pompous use of terms. This was due to the very nature of the panegyric speech. The preacher was supposed not only to touch the faithful emotionally but also to convince them and move them to action. He thus had to make use of highly charged words and expressions; he often used very poetic language. No less striking were the comparisons borrowed from the life and atmosphere of the arena; these comparisons were easily understood at the time since they reflected the contemporary culture. Their meaning, however, changed completely in a Christian sermon. The pagan panegyric speech celebrated the heroes by praising their strength and courage, but the "heroic struggle" of the martyrs, on the contrary, did not consist in their visible or exterior action. The martyr's struggle became an image of the death and the victory of Christ.



St. Nicholas and scenes of his life.

The resemblance to Christ is the key which opens to us an intimate understanding of eastern holiness. Thus the details of a saint's life were patterned after the life of Christ. When painters wanted to represent the birth of St. Nicholas (see plate 10) or St. Sergius of Radonezh, they used exactly the same model as for the birth of the Theotokos, an artistic structure which itself was based on the nativity of Christ. In order to describe the exceptional holiness of these saints, the hagiographers and the painters used other stereotyped scenes, the *topoi*. Some of these scenes included 1) the sterility of John the Baptist and Samuel's parents, 2) the ascetic baby who refused his mother's milk on Wednesday and Friday, the fasting days in the Orthodox Church, and 3) Christ as a child. From his childhood, the saint, like Christ, learned quickly and easily. For the rest of his life, he was given to a monk and lived in the house of God, then became a deacon, priest, and bishop, received the gift of working miracles and healing the sick, expelling demons, etc. All of these were *topoi* of Christ. What is more, at the end of their lives, the martyrs underwent the same fate as their master; they were whipped, tortured, and even crucified. Their burial also recalled the icon of Christ's burial.

In addition, this series of *topoi* always included hagiographic scenes of the events that marked the saint's life as martyr, bishop, or monk. These scenes, nonetheless, included references to the gospel or to the beatitudes: for exam-

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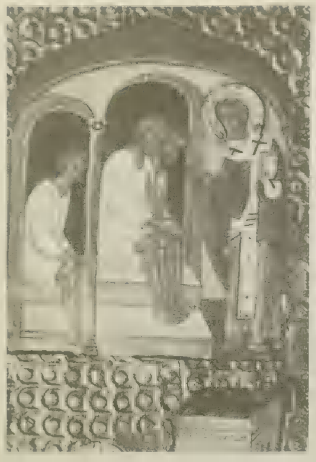
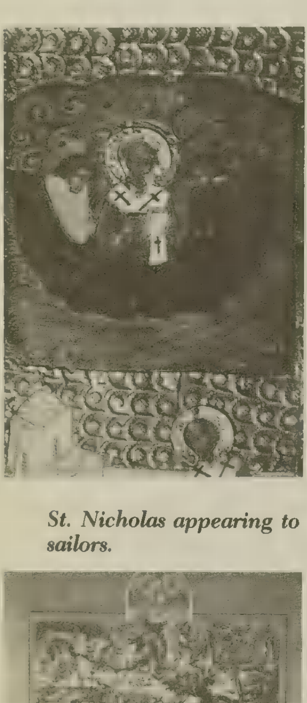
3. Bobrinskoy, p. 228, where Sermon 17 on St. Barlaam is quoted; we have already reproduced a passage of this sermon in Chapter 1: P.G. 31, Col. 488-9



St. Nicholas appearing to prisoners.



St. Nicholas appearing to sailors.

St. John the Baptist in the desert.

ple, St. Nicholas' coming to the aid of prisoners or meditating on the words of Christ which recommended that Christians visit prisonners. (Matthew 25:36; see plates 11 and 12)

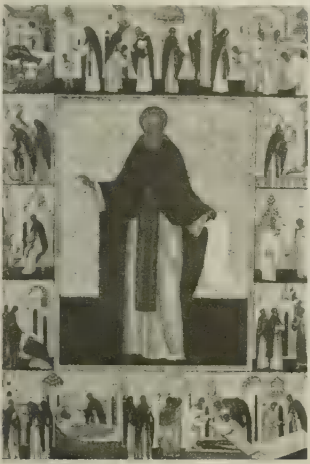
We have a very striking representation of St. John the Baptist in the middle of a paradise (see plate 13); this same *topos* reappeared in the icon of St. Mary of Egypt. The *locus amoenus* of Virgil took on a new meaning here, closely tied to its hagiographic context. The deserts in which the ascetics lived were as terrifying as the deep forests of the Russian north, and these were well described in the Lives of the Saints. These deserts, however, did not become part of the iconographic expression of the saint's life because what was important was its spiritual character: by their victory over the demons, the ascetics transformed the deserts and forests into spiritual paradises. Even hostile nature participated in this transformation: savage beasts were attracted to the saints and lived peacefully with them. The influence of panegyric rhetoric can also be seen in other areas of iconography, even in certain titles given to icons of the Virgin. The Platytera model, for example, came from a liturgical expression: "God has made your womb more spacious than the heavens." The Virgin was represented in an orant position, her hands raised, and in front of her, a disk contained the pre-existant Logos. In the same way, the adult appearance of the child on the icons of the Virgin seemed to be an allusion to Daniel 7:9 where *puer-senex*, a child-old man, is described. The expression *Pantocrator* (he who governs all) showed a parallel influence.

To acknowledge the influence of the panegyric style and genre on iconography does not constitute a demythification. The Lives of the Saints obey the laws of grace and produce their effects independently of the material world. This is what the faithful of the Middle Ages understood instinctively, being as they were more sensitive to the language of symbols. They read icons like a book, and they were saturated by the life and virtues of the saints. They would probably not have understood at all the search for historical truth such as it is conceived by modern science.

The Epic Model

The epic type was the closest to historical truth: it told a story in chronological order and in detail whether it was a biblical event or the life of a saint. The accent was laid on faithfulness to history, and this was what distinguished the epic from the preceding genre which, as we saw, layed great stress on the rhetorical element. For the epic story, historical faithfulness was the dominant requirement.

As in the case of the panegyric model, so with the epic style: on an icon, the scenes were set around the main image and developed its theme. In general, however, the scenes were treated in the "continuous style," that is they were shown within the icon, not around the outside, each scene running into the other without interruption. Panegyric elements were not always missing, but they were subordinated to the structure of the whole.



St. Sergius of Radonezh.

Most often we see the icon of the prophet Elijah painted in the epic style. The scenes could be numerous and varied depending on which aspects of the biblical story were to be represented. Some icons had as many as twelve elements, others only four or six.

The prophet Elijah was very much venerated, especially in Russia, where he became the protector of rural populations supplanting the old pagan god Perun (See plate 15), but his superiority over the other prophets was due to his ascension into heaven on a chariot of fire. This scene always occupied the center of the composition around which were painted the events which led up to it: the prophet in the desert being fed by a crow; an angel awakening him to give him God's order; the prophet raising the son of the widow from Zarephath; and with Elisha, the prophet crossing the Jordan on dry land. Sometimes we even see the slaughter of the pagan priests.

The icon of the Nativity of Christ was composed on the epic model: at the center were the manger and the Virgin; they were surrounded by the persons mentioned in the gospel: angels, shepherds, the three kings. At the bottom, there were two scenes from apocryphal writings: St. Joseph struggling with his doubts and the servants (midwives) washing the baby.

Besides biblical themes, certain icons of saints were also modeled on the epic genre. Among the most ancient examples of this kind, we have the saints Boris and Gleb, sons of Prince Vladimir, who were killed by their pagan brother Sviatoslav; these two saints were the first martyrs of Russia.

Still another example of this epic style is found in the icon of St. Sergius of Radonezh (see plate 14). Let us look at it in more detail. On the edges, we have the events of the saint's life: his birth, his education by a monk, his ordination, and then the events tied to the foundation of his monastery. The lives of St. Peter and St. Alexis the metropolitans of Moscow were depicted in the same way.

If we compare these icons with Greek and Balkan frescoes, we recognize a more sober and objective style in the Russian icons. The fresco painters were fond of showing scenes of the saints' death, often with surprising violence; they also revealed a taste for miraculous events, and this brought them close to the panegyric model. These features could be explained by the historical environments in which they were painted: the iconographers aimed at sustaining the faith of Christians during the trials and tribulations of the Turkish occupation.

The epic model faithfully followed the story of the sacred books or the Lives of the Saints. Even so, the icon never became a simple illustration of history because its spiritualized forms conferred on it the aura of mystery; in its own way, the icon translated the supernatural dimension of Holy Scripture and the life of the saint into visual images.

The Dramatic Model

If the dramatic element is inherent in all human reality and finds its specific expression in the theater, it is nonetheless not absent from other art forms since drama is not simply a theatrical technique but is also fundamentally human. It is therefore not surprising that the dramatic element has held an important place in sermons and religious stories.

Already in the 2nd century Melito of Sardis, and Ephrem the Syrian in the 4th century, had knowingly used antithetical expressions and dialogues in order to elicit dramatic tension which so fascinated audiences. Later on, these expressions were taken up in liturgical hymns which, in their turn, inspired religious painting.

Painters also made use of this same tension by highlighting conflicts, surprises, and contradictions. The life of Christ, his passion and resurrection offered the painter a nearly endless source of inspiration and, at the same time, provided the *topoi* for hagiographic scenes. Even here, however, suffering took on an aspect that went beyond the merely human level because in the passion of Christ, and even the passions of the martyrs, suffering always called to mind the divine drama of redemption.

Although the problem of suffering was insoluable in the darkness of paganism, it received an answer in the cross of Christ, and what is more, in the light of the resurrection, hope was reborn and even triumphed. By its theological orientation, the icon of the crucifixion discouraged any meditation on the terrible sufferings of Christ, such as is found in Gothic art; through the shadows of death, this icon allows us to glimpse the epiphany of the Son of Man, the source of our hope (see plate 16). Christ's attitude is one of calm and peace; in contrast, however, those at the foot of the cross express a pained compassion. The dramatic feeling of the scene has its source in this contrast.

Dramatic tension brought other scenes to life as well. In the icon of the Annunciation, the tension is produced by the contrast between the lordly gesture of the angel Gabriel and the peaceful, meditative attitude of the Virgin as she weighs the gravity of her decision. We find a similar gesture in the icon of the resurrection of Lazarus. In Christ, we have the gesture of Him who has power over life and death while around Him are expressed highly contrasting attitudes: bewilderment of the incredulous Jews, the joyous surprise of the apostles, and the confident gratitude of Lazarus' sisters.

Yet another example of the dramatic model is found in the icon of the resurrection itself: the Descent into Hell. More than any other icon, the fresco of Kahriye Camii brings out the intensity of the dramatic tension. Everything is concentrated on one moment, on the person of the resurrected Christ whose white clothing on a dark blue background shines like lightening. Christ goes down into the kingdom of darkness to bring Adam and Eve out, and with them all the righteous dead; the two movements are blended into one, and the simplicity of the scene makes possible its immense grandeur. On other icons, we see angels carrying the instruments of torture or destroying demons, but such elaborations remain peripheral to the central mystery.

The fresco of Kahriye Camii shows that a choice has been made by the iconographer: among the many symbols and images which are evoked during the liturgy of Pascha, this one image alone represents the central theme, isolates it from the other elements, and thus attains a rare dramatic power (see plate 17).

The Theological Treatise as Model

The purpose of every icon, even the most modest one, is not limited to the painting of a specific scene or person; every icon carries with it a theological background. Through colors and forms, the image represents what Holy Scripture teaches by the word. If theology deepens a truth by intellectual reasoning, the image offers us truth as a vision. The image thus always remains in the figurative realm even when it transfigures concrete reality so as to bring out its theological significance. Right from the beginning, icons contained these two elements: the theological meaning was always tied to a concrete representation, this law has guided the whole evolution of iconography.

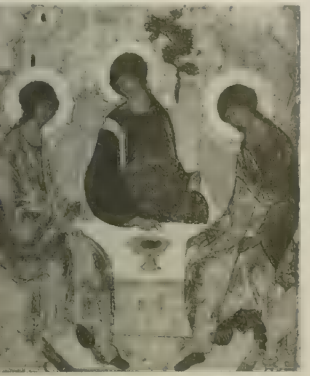
The theological element in icons had a different function from that of the panegyric genre. The panegyric speech remained primarily in the domain of language and form, making of the icon a *laudatio*, a eulogy of the saint. The theological element, however, touched on the very substance of the matter, that is the ultimate meaning of the persons or event represented. The icon reflected the meaning of the mystery thus raising Byzantine art to its ultimate degree of spiritualization. This theological aspect might dominate the complete composition as in Ustiug's icon of the Annunciation, 13th century, in which the Christ child, Emmanuel, is superimposed in red on the breast of the Virgin. Later, especially in Russia from the 16th century on, the theological meaning itself became the direct subject of the icons: they were no longer a personal presence of the prototype but a treatise on theology.

This phenomenon can be illustrated by the evolution of the Trinity icon. In the Byzantine model, this icon was known under the name of *philoxenia*, the Hospitality of Abraham who received the three visitors at the oak of Mamre. In the 4th century, this very ancient theme was depicted in a mosaic of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome which illustrated the event reported in Genesis 18:1-15; the Greek fathers often interpreted this event as a visit of the Holy Trinity to Abraham. The attention accorded to the three heavenly persons justified this interpretation as a divine theophany. But the details, the objects on the table, Abraham and Sarah serving their guests, the servant killing the calf, these gave the image its historical character. This historical model was reproduced up until the 15th and 16th centuries when with Andrei Rublev, the dogmatic element began to dominate and determine the whole composition. The details were reduced to the essential; the only remaining element was the three heavenly visitors, in silent conversation; and the table became an altar having only a eucharistic cup on it. Certain secondary elements such as the rock, the oak tree, and the house, became symbols, and an invisible geometric structure, mostly the circle, created a unity that allowed the artist's intention to show through: represent the Holy Trinity in its movement of love as the source of man's salvation.

Another icon of the Trinity showed a subsequent evolution, one which departed from the biblical tradition and directly represented the divine persons and their procession one from the other; we have here a purely theological conception. Thus in the representation of Paternitas (see plate 31), the eternal Father is shown with the Word in his lap; Christ the Word holds a halo in which we see the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. Even though this representation has a biblical basis ("The Son who is in the bosom of the Father," John 1:18 and "The Comforter whom I will send to you from the Father," John 15:26), it especially reflected the distinction between the persons and their relations such as St. Gregory of Nazianzus had defined them: the Father is uncreated and without origin; the Son is born of the Father; and the Spirit proceeds and is sent.

This dynamic conception of the mystery has found its expression in the canon of Pentecost:

> *King of kings, you who are the unique One from Him who is unique, the only Word proceedng from the Father without origin, in your good will, you have truly caused your Spirit, who is your equal in being, to shine on your apostles as they sing: Glory to your power, Oh Lord. (4)*



The councils of Moscow rejected this direct depiction of the Trinity, as well as the others with a purely dogmatic theme, not only because of their abstract character but also because of a certain ambiguity with regard to the "Filioque," a question of great importance for the Orthodox Church. These paintings no longer presented a person or a concrete event of Holy Scripture, and they lacked the direct link with the mystery of the incarnation. The conciliar prohibitions, however, could not stop an evolution that had its roots in the religious life of the 16th century.

Under the influence of classical studies and rationalistic philosophy coming from the West, people were much too fascinated by these new ideas to be happy with the simplicity of ancient forms. It was at this time that purely dogmatic icons began to multiply; the names of these works are enough to indicate their speculative character: "Word and Only Son," "Our Father," and "In You Rejoices All Creation."

The miniaturized style allowed the execution of icons with a multitude of different scenes and a profusion of details. The icon had become a theological and philosophical treatise which read like an esoteric book (see plate 34), but the symbols and allegories of various cultural origins (ancient, oriental, cabalistic) could only be read by scholars. The people remained separated from this world. It is thus difficult to describe in detail any one of these icons since the analysis today depends on a scientific study which would allow us to discover the keys of these scholarly constructions as well as their place in the mentality of the period.

With these dogmatic representations, a thousand year period in the history of iconography also came to an end. We can only be a bit sad in learning about this evolution: from an image whose essence was to manifest the mystery of Christ, to pure doctrinal teaching, and then to a game of signs and symbols for the amusement of minds puffed up with the pride of intellectual abilities.

Finally then we have to face the following question: how could the theological richness of the icon, its language and its means of expression be nearly lost? The answer which is often

4. Euthyme Mercenier, *La prière des Eglises de rite byzantine*, 4th ode, Editions de l'abbaye de Chevetongne, Chevetogne, 1948, p. 373.

given, that of "western rationalism", is really only a partial answer because it raises yet another question: how is it that the icon with its spiritual depth was not able to resist this rationalism?

Neither historians nor theologians will be able to give us a satisfying answer. Let us hope, however, that we will be able to find the true icon under its ever renewing surface manifestation, the true icon which reflects the values of our time but even more the Christian faith of all time.

Chapter 5

The Theories of the Image

Introduction

The long historical development of the sacred image allows us to uncover its theological sources as well as its cultural conditioning. It is time now to deal with the problem of the icon on the theoretical level. We have clearly seen what was at stake theologically in the struggle over images: the incarnation of the Word of God and his relation with the world and matter. What remains now is to consider the theory of the icon in a more abstract fashion: what is the essence of the image? As we will see, this unavoidable question is at the crossroads between philosophy and theology.

In order to better understand the spiritual dimensions of the icon, it is necessary to distinguish it from images. The image belongs to the category of signs by which the human mind represents the world. Since the time of Plato, philosophers have constructed different systems for proving that thought corresponds to reality, that what we think is real is in fact real. As a result of this intellectual labor, two major schools of thought have developed: Platonism and Aristotelianism.

Platonism proclaims that man recognizes the things of the world by means of pre-existing ideas. Before birth, each person has seen these ideas which alone have a real existence. What exists in the material world is only a shadow of the eternal world of ideas.

The West, its dominant philosophical traditions, and modern science most often follow the other school, Aristotelianism. In this line of thinking, knowledge is possible because the human mind is capable of making abstractions from individual elements so as to identify the essence of things and then classify them in a restricted number of categories.

These theories of knowledge play a great role in the conception of the image and both of them have been used to explain the icon. We can even go so far as to say that image theory is a particular case of the general theory of knowledge.

The Image as Sign

According to Aristotelianism, man has two paths open to him that lead to knowledge of the world: 1) direct thought in which an object presents itself to sense perception without any intermediary and 2) indirect thought in which a specified sign comes between the reality and the mind. Even if this distinction is not always precise because our mind can deal with various degrees of images, indirect representation is based on the sign which necessarily includes two elements: a) the *signifiant*, the material, visible manifestation of the sign and b) the *signifié*, the meaning which the sign announces. These two elements, two aspects of the same reality, constitute the sign. Thus in the sign, the spiritual, or mental, and material worlds unite.

As an indirect representation, a sign can be a simple imitation, a more or less faithful reproduction of reality; as such, it can then call forth the presence of the reality represented. The sign can represent the object as a stylized copy or can be based on conventions. To this category belong the signs and symbols of everyday life: road signs, scientific symbols, algorisms, and even the written words of a language. Their function is to express definition in a clearer and more practical manner than full sentences, but they have a limited usefulness; they are in a way closed in on themselves.

When a sign no longer represents a material object but an abstract meaning, that is when the meaning is no longer representable as a picture, then we have a dimension which goes beyond the material manifestation of the sign, the *signifiant:* the sign then becomes a symbol. Thus, in the symbol, the *signifiant* and the *signifie* are intimately united, but they are united by analogy and not by equation. There is a relation between the concrete, materialized sign and an absent reality which is impossible to perceive. Nonetheless, despite its limits, the *signifiant* represents the full meaning of the *signifié*. What is more, being influenced by the *signifié*, the *signifiant* participates in an opening toward the infinite. The symbol is thus centripetal; by the *signifié*, it moves toward the unspeakable and becomes an epiphany. This interaction enlarges the qualities of the sign; it can thus express non-depictable values, even contradictory or antinomical ones.

For example, the symbol "fire" can have an extensive meaning running from "purifying fire" to "hell fire."

There is yet another result of the extension of the symbol though it is difficult to determine its exact meaning. A symbol can even have several meanings; depending on the philosophy and vision of a particular artist or the influence of historical circumstances, a symbol can even receive a whole new level of meaning. Thus the orant of the catacombs could be a symbol of the soul of the deceased person, of personified prayer, or even of the Church.

The transcendant character of the symbol also requires a mode of expression which goes beyond that of the sign. By limiting itself to one direct meaning, the symbol represents its content with a certain emphasis; it amplifies the force of expression and acts by redundancy. To this, we add repetition which allows the symbol to deepen its radiant quality. Thus in the religious realm, by the repetition of words and gestures, the faithful are invited to open themselves to the world of the Beyond.

Other forms also belong to the category of symbol: emblem, allegory, parable, and even sign with its different meanings in modern philosophy. All this shows the richness and the potential uses of the symbol but does not change its essence, its transcendant character.

Christian thought which tries to express in words the mysteries of faith has largely used symbols and symbolic language. In the beginning, Christian thought used symbols that, despite their pagan origin, represented transcendant human values; they were deepened and enriched by a specifically Christian meaning. As examples, we have the dove, the peacock, and the anchor. Later on, the original meaning faded away to make room for new creations such as the fish or the lamb, symbols of Christ. At the end of this evolution when theology will have worked out the doctrine of the incarnation, the icon will replace the symbol so as to become the priviledged representation of the mystery. (1)

While keeping all the characteristics of the sign and the symbol, the sacred image, the icon, adds the human element. Transcendant and abstract, the symbol becomes a transcendant but concrete image. Thus the infinite is reflected in finitude and the unspeakable becomes expressable.

The Image as Participation in the Divine

In his analysis of the different types of images (*On the*

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1. This is how we ought to understand canon 82 of the Quinisexte Council (also called in Trullo). Only the icon can express the incarnate character of the Christian faith; the symbol keeps its place as long as it fulfills its function.

Divine Images, around 730), St. John of Damascus made use of the Neoplatonic categories of Dionysius the Areopagite for whom the image was a participation in the model, in the prototype. Participation is not simply poetic but ontological; participation is an ontological resemblance. By its very nature, participation in the creaturely order is never adequate and always includes a deficiency. Thus St. John defined the image in the following way: "An image is of like character with its prototype, but with a certain difference. It is not like its archetype in every way." (2) The degree of similarity depends on the degree of the image's participation in the prototype. This was St. John's principle of classification. Starting from the consubstantial image of the Word of God, St. John arrived at the icon which is the reflection in matter of the invisible realities.

In its perfect form, the image does not exist except in the Holy Trinity, that is the eternal Word of God begotten by the Father, possessing in Himself the fullness of the divine nature. Everything that the Father possesses belongs also to the Son. (3) The Word of God is a perfect participation in his prototype, the Father, without deficiency and a perfect resemblance. The nature of the Word is the same as that of his prototype, the Father.

At the next level of this hierarchy, we have the image that God has of the things he has created: the world as it exists in the "pre-eternal council of God." St. John adopted here the expression of Dionysius who had qualified these images as "predeterminations." Even before their material existence, created things were from all eternity present in the thought of God as a model, an image.

The third kind of image consists of visible things in so far as they represent invisible things "without shape so that in giving the invisible things a physical shape, we can have a veiled knowledge of them." (4) The reason for this is that man cannot rise to the contemplation of the invisible without the intermediary of the visible. Thus Holy Scripture has adapted itself to the inadequacy of our minds so as to awaken in us a desire for God. In the same way, nature reveals the mysteries of faith: the mystery of the Trinity is reflected in the sun, its light, and its rays, and in order to have a resemblance to God, man has received intelligence, power of speech, and breath.

The fourth kind of image is close to the preceding one: it consists of future things which can be prefigured by an object

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2. *On Divine Images*, 1, 9, p. 19.

3. Colossians 1:15: 'He is the image of the invisible God.'; Hebrews 1:3: 'He is the radiant light of God's glory and the perfect copy of his nature...'

4. Schoenborn, pp. 191-3.

or a present event. Thus the burning bush brings to mind the Mother of God; water and the cloud remind us of the Spirit who baptizes.

In the fifth category, we have images of past things that are produced to keep alive the memory of a person or a past event. These images are expressed by words in a book or drawn on canvas so that everyone can see them: "...to encourage those who look upon them to practice good and avoid evil." (5) It is at this point that St. John mentioned icons: "therefore we now set up images in remembrance of valiant men, that we may zealously desire to follow their example." (6)

St. John did not go farther in his analysis of the image. In this hierarchy which goes from the perfect resemblance of substantial identity between the Father and the Son, to material things, the image occupies the lowest degree. The analogy here is the least perfect. St. John did not distinguish the natural image, which is alone capable of participating in the substance of the prototype, and the artificial image which only participates in its prototype by resembling it. According to St. John, the notion of the image was based rather on the idea of ontological participation.

The reason behind these ambiguities no doubt comes from the fact that St. John had to deal with the basic objection of iconoclasm, that is that matter is bad and incapable of representing spiritual realities. In order to defend the value of matter, he remained within the Neoplatonic categories of Dionysius. Thus he gave a new dimension to ontological participation by grounding it in Christology:

> *Never will I cease honoring the matter which wrought my salvation! I honor it, but not as God. How could God be born out of things which have no existence in themselves? God's body is God because it is joined to His person by a union which shall never pass away. The divine nature remains the same; the flesh created in time is quickened by a reason-endowed soul. Because of this I salute all remaining matter with reverence, because God has filled it with His grace and power. (...) Do not despise matter, for it is not despicable. God has made nothing despicable. (7)*

This text sets out quite admirably the richness of the image even if the image belongs to the last degree of the hierarchy. The fundamental principle of this notion is based on the incarnation of the Word of God. In the union of the Word with

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5. *On Divine Images*, I, 13, p. 21.
6. *Ibid.*, III, 23, p. 78.
7. *Ibid.*, I, 16, pp. 23-4.

human nature, the body of Christ has become holy, filled with grace. St. John even called it *homotheos*, equal to God. And in Christ's body, all matter was sanctified.

> *It seems that according to the thinking of St. John of Damascus, there was a communication of holiness radiating from the body of Christ to all other matter, an ontological participation between the body of Christ and its image. The icon can thus become an object that mediates grace. (8)*

These two analyses of the image, the one in the spirit and method of Aristotelianism and the other following the thought forms of Dionysian Neoplatonism, may seem at first glance to be opposed, but in the final analysis, they overlap. The analysis of the sign starts from the most simple form and rises to the symbol with its epiphanic character. The analysis of the icon begins with the consubstantial image in the Trinity and descends to the greatest materialization. Undeniably the latter conception is the richer; it pre-supposes the Christian revelation and is more at home in the Byzantine world. The two analyses, however, have the icon's essential feature in common: a presence of the unspeakable which springs forth from matter.

8. Schoenborn, p. 195.

SECTION II: AESTHETIC ELEMENTS

Introduction

Just as artists first of all draw the outline of a portrait in one single color and little by little build up one color on another thus making the likeness of the portrait conform more and more to its model...in the same way also, in baptism, the grace of God begins to operate by remaking the image what it was when man came into existence. And when that grace sees us aspiring to the beauty of the likeness with all our heart...then, building up virtue on virtue and elevating the beauty of the soul from glory to glory, grace produces in the soul the very imprint of the likeness.

One Hundred Gnostic Chapters, 89,
Diadochus of Photic

A person who is unacquanted with iconography can still be sensitive to the harmony which radiates from an icon painted by a master. Even rather modest icons, painted by less talented artists, elicit admiration by their simplicity and even by the primitive character of some of their elements. Nonetheless, if we compare these less refined icons with the masterpieces of the great artists, we discover a great difference.

This difference, first and foremost, is related to the way the icons are drawn, the techniques used in producing the design. It is not the artistic quality of the drawing which constitutes the dominant element but rather the harmony of the whole. It is thus impossible to compare the structure of an icon with the sketch, even inspired and brilliant, of a master. Instead of being the fruit of an intuition or the translation of an impression or abstraction, the icon is the fruit of a tradition. Even before it is painted, the icon is a work that has been meditated upon over a long period of time and patiently worked out by generations of painters.

The icon is thus undergirded by a structure in which each element, according to its meaning and its value, finds its place. Icons can obviously not be reduced to this structure, but the structure is their necessary condition of existence; this is especially true for those of a master. The structure is in fact the very hallmark of such a master's work.

We are immediately faced with the following question: Is this structure the result of a long refinement moving toward the perfection of the work, or is the structure preconceived as the organizing principle of the work? Is this structure the result of the work or the source and origin of the masterpiece? The question is still being debated.

Certain recently discovered historical facts can be cited to support the second opinion; a rigorous and systematic analysis of those icons painted by the masters also seems to substantiate the second theory. What do these original and recent studies bring to light? We now know that iconographers were classified in a hierarchy of different categories. In the *Gramota of the Three Patriarchs*, a text which was confirmed by Tsar Alexis Mikhailovitch in 1669, we have an indication that there were five categories of iconographers. The most eminent painters were the *znameniteli* who prepared the overall decorative program and drew the geometric structures as well as the outlines of the design; they were also responsible for the execution of the paintings.

In his research, V. N. Lazarev (1) has shown that there

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1. Victor Lazarev, Russkaia srednevekovaia Zhivopis (Medieval Russian Painting), Nauka, Moscow, 1970. pp. 7-12.

were as many monks as laymen in the teams of painters who decorated the churches. Both groups were equally venerated and well paid. In 1481, Dionysius received the enormous sum, enormous at the time, of 100 rubles for having painted the iconostasis of the Dormition Church in the Moscow Kremlin. Unfortunately the secrets behind the composition of these masters have not come down to us. Under the frescoes, we have nonetheless discovered traces of geometric drawings which the painters used to help organize the wall space and later to facilitate the execution of the designs. The same technique has been found in the romanesque paintings of the West: for example, at Nurmberg/Salzburg and St. Savin near Poitou.

Fresco painters also produced icons in churches, and it is more than just probable that they used the same principles of composition. The analyses that have been done in recent years demonstrate that this is in fact the case.

Chapter 6

Geometric Structures

Proportions

The theories about proportion current in the Greco-Byzantine world were well known in medieval Russia. In the *Gramota of the Three Patriarchs*, such authors as Pliny, Aristotle, Polygnotus, Theophrastes, and others are mentioned. In this work, painters are urged to work according to "artistic and scholarly proportions." In other manuscripts, a knowledge of geometry was considered absolutely necessary for artistic work since the painter had to be able to draw geometric structures and make correct measurements.

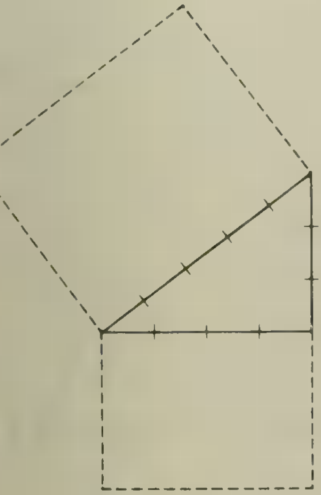

Fig. 1

Most icons had proportions based on simple numbers, less than ten. About 30% of icons had a proportion of 3:4; another 30% had 4:5; and about 10% had proportions of 2:3, 5:7, or 5:6. For full standing figures, the proportions 2:5 or 1:3 were used. The predominance of the proportions 3:4 and 4:5 can no doubt be explained by the artists' knowledge of the "sacred triangle" (3:4:5) which allowed them to draw a right angle with precision. (figure 1)

Lines and arcs were drawn with a cord or thread covered with a colored powder or soot. The string was held above the surface, and by pulling it and then letting it go, the artists were able to draw straight lines. This procedure is used by builders even today.

For circles, the string was used as a radius, and a piece of coal was attached to its end. On small boards, a compass was used.

By drawing arcs from some point on the base of the icon (AB) or from some point on lines parallel to the base (CD, EF, etc.), these lines having a distance from AB based on a fraction of AB, the artists could obtain all the formats which correspond to the golden number. We know that this number was very important for the artists of the Renaissance and that, even today, it has guided the calculations of Le Cor-

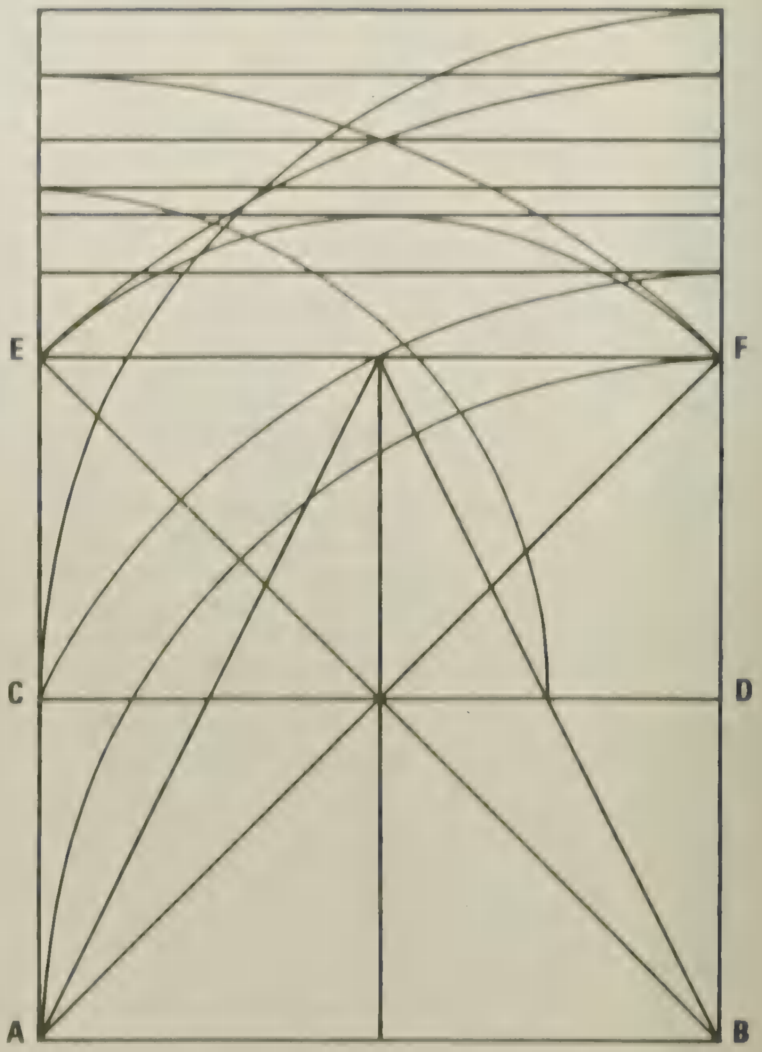

Fig. 2

busier. (figure 2)

The various possibilities of structuring the surface of a board that was to be painted were not left to the free choice of the painter; the structures had to correspond to the subject to be represented. The artists were therefore required to know the iconographic subjects in all their details as well as the possibilities of their arrangement. These two elements, the subjects and the possible arrangement of the details, were set out in the artists' sketch-books, *svitki*. Such designs on parchment bound together in loose notebooks were the precursors of the *podlinniki* or painters' manuals. The chronicle of the monastery of the Kievan caves mentions that the sketch-books and the manuals of the Greek artists who had decorated the church in the 11th century were preciously guarded in the sacristy.

Another source of inspiration was found in manuscripts. As in the West, manuscripts were copied and recopied by generations of painters, and thus were dispersed in many countries.

In many cases, sketches were simply enlarged by means of a grid. Often, however, the size and format of an image's surface were determined by physical constraints: a) the different proportions of the available space; thus in the church of the Prophet Elijah in Novgorod, Theophane's Trinity is limited by the curved surface of the vault or b) the proportions and dimensions of an icon that had to fit into the space available on the iconostasis whose dimensions were themselves determined by the size and shape of the church. In these cases, it was necessary to shape the elements of an icon so as to give the subject balance and to situate the persons represented according to their importance and the logical relations of the scene.

We can thus understand the importance of the iconographer-composer, *znamenitel*, and the honor given to him by his contemporaries.

Compositional diagrams or outlines are already mentioned in the manuscripts of the 16th and 17th centuries. They are called *zastavitsa* and can be reduced to the following geometric forms: the triangle, the cross, the grid, and the circle. V.N. Lazarev has confirmed that these forms were well known in these centuries even among those who were not artists.

Geometric Structures for Bust Figures

The Triangle

The shape, if it is an isosceles triangle, is in perfect symmetry and rests firmly on its base in a balanced position. (fig. 3a) An isosceles triangle is satisfying to the eye as well as to the mind; it is also used in western art especially in the many Madonna paintings.

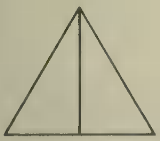

Fig. 3a

In his analysis of the icon of the Prophet Elijah (Novgorod 14th-15th centuries) (plate 19), A. A. Titz (2) discovered elements that cannot be attributed to chance; for example, this icon was painted in the proportions 3:4. The center of the halo is found on the vertical axis of symmetry, which divides the image in equal halves from top to bottom, and in the

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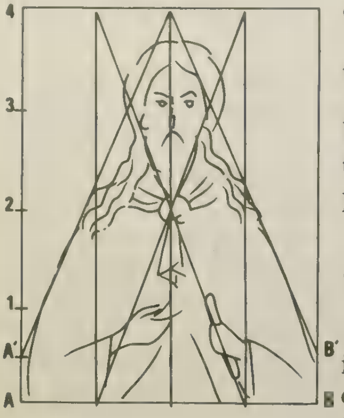
2. Alexei A. Titz, *Nekotorye zakonomernosti komposizii ikon, (Some Principles Concerning the Composition of Icons)*, Drevnerusskoe iskusstvo, Moscow, 1963, pp. 22-53.

middle of the upper side of a square formed by the base. The radius of the circle is equal to 1/4 of the base, and the diameter is thus 1/2 of the base. If we draw two vertical tangents to this circle, we obtain a rectangle on whose diagonals the prophet's hands and beard are aligned.

Fig. 3b



In order to give a greater aura of importance to the bust, the painter has raised the base of the triangle by a value of 1/2, that is 1/8 of the height of the composition (A'B'). The bust of the prophet is set in this triangle. His head is slightly turned to the left and his eyes to the right; the whole composition thus looses some of its rigidity. (figure 3b)

The Halo

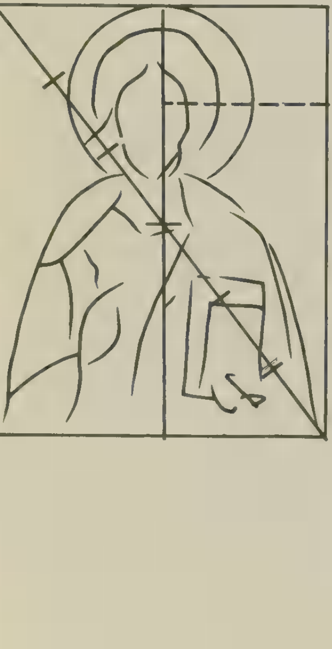
In order to better understand the composition of an icon, it is necessary to study the role played by the halo, an element of prime importance in the geometric structure. This does not take us away from the basic compositional diagrams because the halo is for all icons a center around which the subject to be represented is constructed.

The halo encircles the head of the person represented and is the central part of each icon. This is why artists determined the size of the halo and its position at the beginning of the geometric composition.

The proportional relation between the halo and the face has been different in different ages, but in general, we can establish the following table:

	radius of the halo	standing figure	seated figure
15th century	1	8 or 9	8
16th-18th centuries	1	10	9
Dionysius	1	12	10

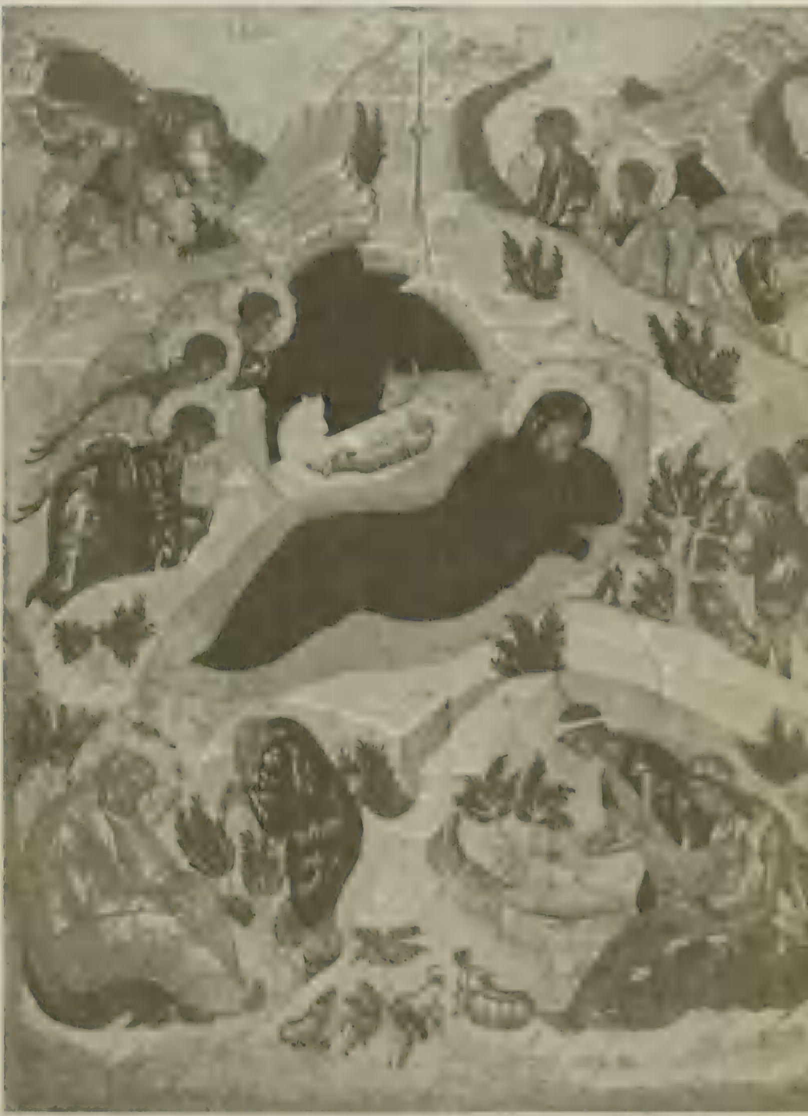
Fig. 4



This table shows the tendency to lengthen the height of the human figures. The reason for this evolution can no doubt be found in the desire of the iconographers to give to the saints a greater nobility and an increased spiritual grandeur.

In icons representing the bust of a saint, the radius of the halo is 1/6 of the diagonal of the composition, sometimes 1/5. There is also a relation between the size of the halo and the head; the two are usually set in two concentric circles. (figure 4)

The relation between the circle of the halo and that of the head, however, is not fixed as claimed. The proportion between the two diameters can be 1:2, 2:3, or 3:5.



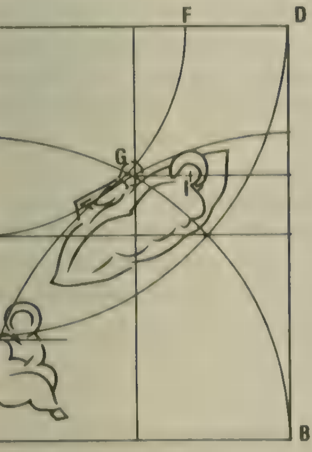


Fig. 5

The importance of the halo is seen especially by its place in the composition. On icons that show the full face of saints as well as in large compositions such as the Assembly Around the Virgin, the center of the two circles that delimit the halo and the head is found at the intersection of the vertical axis of symmetry and the upper line of the square formed by the base.

Another interesting example of geometric composition is the icon of the Nativity, Rublev 15th century. (plate 20) The halo of the Christ-Child, the dogmatic center of the icon, is found at the intersection of two circles drawn from the lower two corners of the base, A and B. (figure 5)

The halo of the Virgin is determined by the radius of the circle CE = 1/2CA: the halo's center is found on the vertical line FI which is determined by the horizontal line G. Before composing the whole work, the painter had to be well acquainted with the geometric structure of the icon.

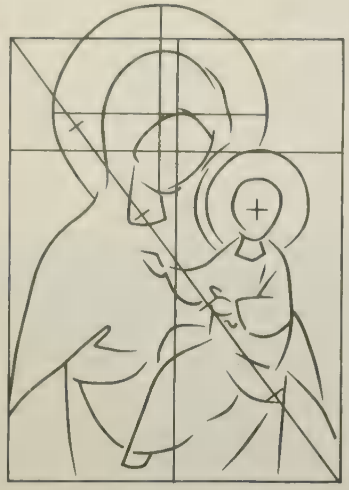


Fig. 6

Around the 15th century, icons with halos that extended onto the upper frame became more and more numerous. In icons of the Virgin and Child, the Christ-Child is usually found below the upper line of the square formed by the base. (figures 6 and 7)

The center for Virgins of the Hodighitria model, end of the 14th century, (plate 18) was also found on this line, but it was moved to the left of the vertical axis of symmetry in order to put the Virgin and the Christ-Child in proper balance. This composition has the disadvantage of creating a large empty space in the two upper corners. (figure 6) This is one of the reasons why the halo of the Hodighitria Virgin of Smolensk, 15th century, extends onto the frame. (figure 7) Thus the empty space is reduced, and the Virgin seems closer to the spectator by appearing to go beyond the frame.

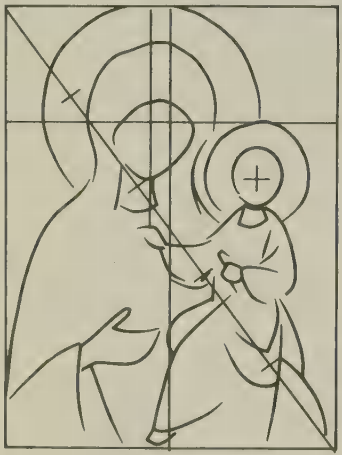


Fig. 7

These proportions also appear on the icons of certain iconostases where the saints are painted so as to lean toward the central icon of Christ, *(tchin.)* By playing the fractions of the base or the height of the icon, the painter was able to give each person a proper balance. (3) Even festal icons and scenes from the lives of the saints which require a lot of movement were constructed according to these structures. Such methods used in the initial stages of icon drawing suppose not only a profound knowledge of the icon's content but also an ability to work with abstractions because the geometric structures were the skeleton or frame of the represented event.

These are some of the examples analyzed by N.V. Gusev. (4) After examining about 300 icons, the author found the same laws of composition, despite some variants. We can conclude therefore that these laws were well known by icongraphers up to the 17th century and that they were

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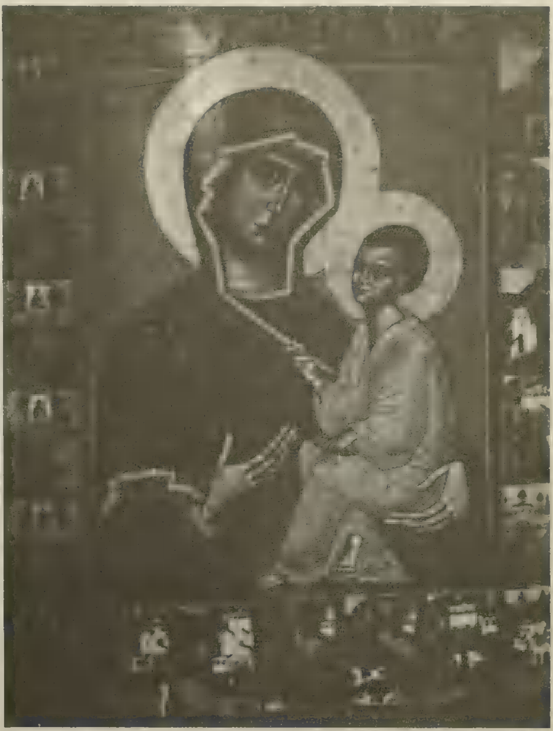
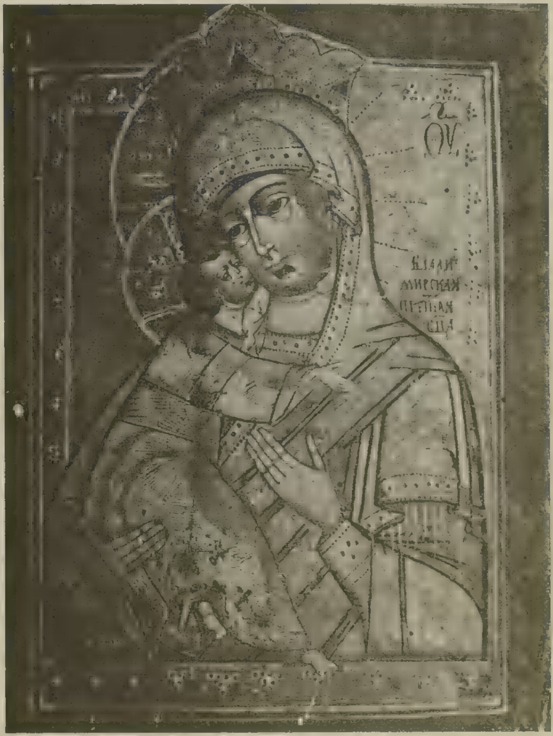
3. This point will be studied in a later chapter.

4. N. V. Gusev, "Nekotorye priemy postroenia komposizii v drevnerusskoy zivopis i XI-XVII vekov," ('Some Structural Procedures Used in the Composition of Ancient Russian Painting') *Drevnerusskoe iskusstvo*, t. 3, Ed. Moscow, 1968, pp. 126- 139.



The Tichvine Virgin: *18th c. (Rublev Museum, Moscow).*



The Virgin of Vladimir: *Russian icon, 18th c. (private collection).*

discarded when icon painters started to imitate western naturalism.

Geometric Structures for Standing Figures: Squares and Circles

The majority of icons showing standing saints are found on iconostases, especially on the row above the Royal Doors. This compositional form represents the heavenly hierarchy gathered around Christ who is seated on a throne. Such a grouping of icons is called "deisis" that is prayer, and it is this "deisis" which gives the iconostasis its theological meaning. The iconostasis was originally a simple barrier around the altar and served to separate the nave from the sanctuary, the terrestrial community from the heavenly liturgy. By incorporating the "deisis" into the simple barrier, the iconostasis acquired another function - it became the link between God and the people. As the iconostasis developed through history, especially in Russia starting with the 14th century, the icons on the "deisis" row took on more and more importance. In the cathedral churches in Moscow or Vladimir, these icons are more than three meters (ten feet) in height. Despite these monumental dimensions, such icons had to find their place in the architectural whole, spatial requirements of this kind therefore demanded a great deal of knowledge and technical expertise on the part of the painters.

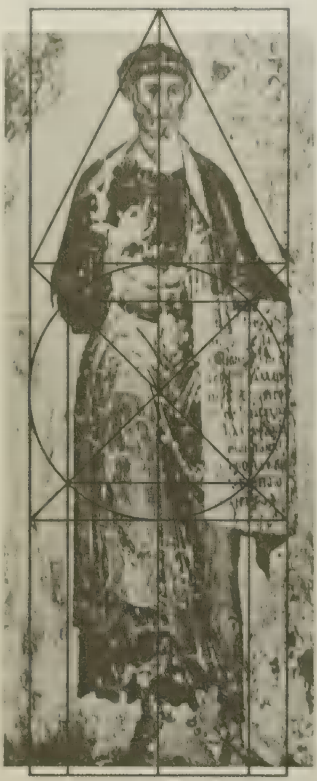


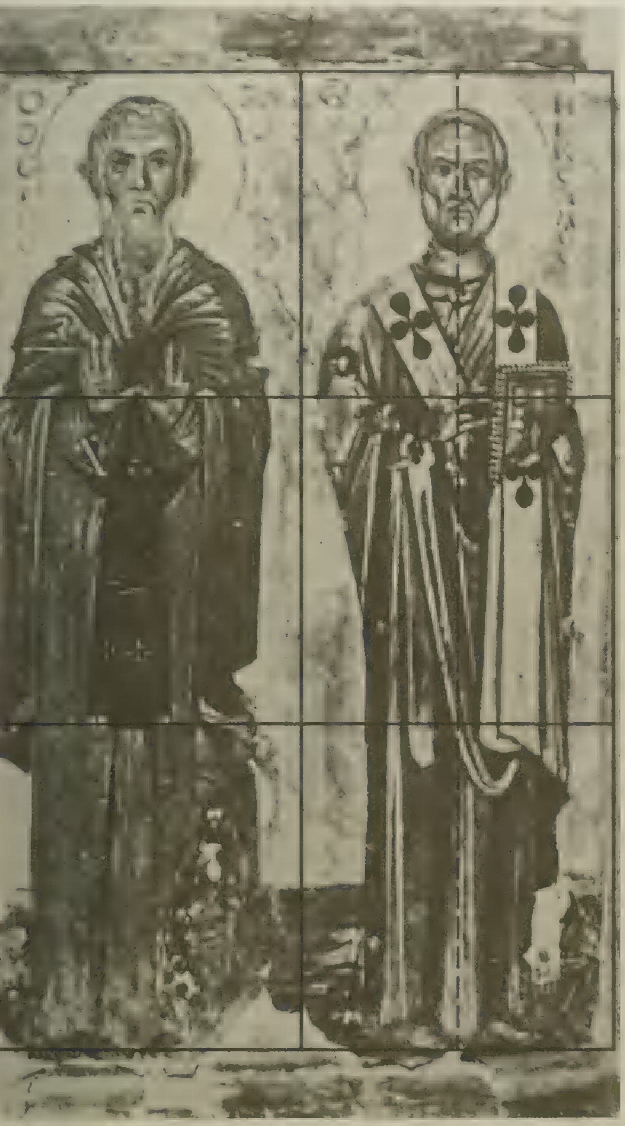
Fig. 8
***St. Peter:** Mount Athos, the Lavra Monastery, 12th c.*

For icons of standing saints, the proportions of the boards on which they were painted were usually 1:2, 2:3, or 2:5. The structure of the composition therefore had to be rather simple in order to permit an artistic unity among all the icons as well as to adapt certain sections of the iconostasis to the different types of saints - angels, apostles, ascetics, kings, etc.

In Byantine art, outlines or diagrams for different iconographic subjects had already been developed. For a standing figure, there was nearly always a structure of three squares as we can see on the Greek icon of St. Peter, 12th century, *Protaton*, Mount Athos. (figure 8) The upper square contains the bust with a halo. The elbows at the level of the base of the upper square. In the middle square, we see the pelvic area to the knees, and in the lower square, the feet. The width of the body corresponds to the square inscribed in the circle. The whole is well proportioned and manifests great nobility.

We find this same structure on an icon of the 10th century, St. Zosimus and St. Nicholas, found at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai. (figure 9) The proportions are the same though the heads are larger, and the lack of movement gives a certain heaviness to the figures.

In his study of the compositional structures of Russian icons, A. A. Titiz analyzed several examples from the Rublev era. Studies of this kind are still rare for Byzantine art, and



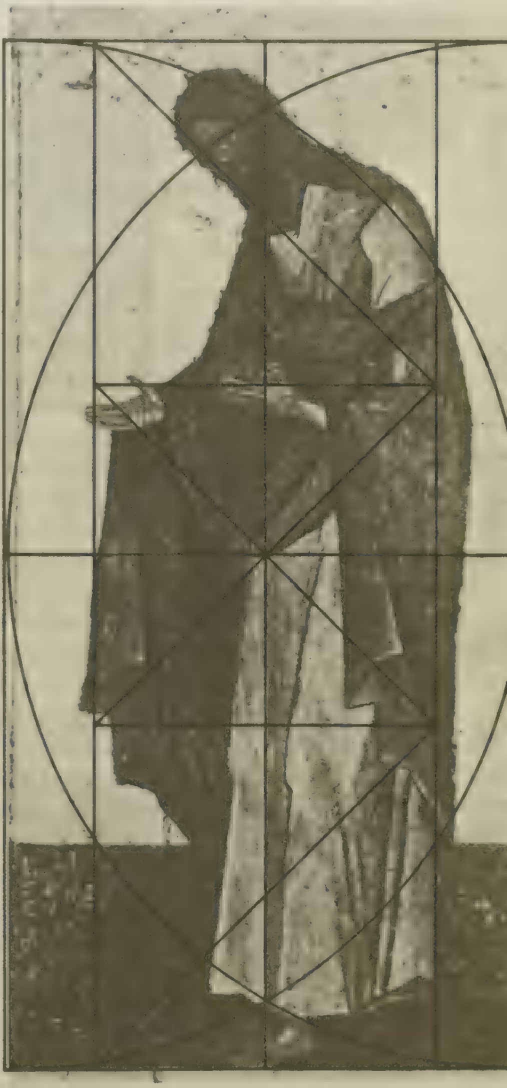


Fig. 9
Sts. Zosimus and Nicholas:
Sinai, St. Catherine's Monastery, 10th c. (20.6 x 14.1 cm.).

Fig. 10
St. John the Baptist:
Theophane the Greek, Annunciation Cathedral, the Moscow Kremlin, 1405.

the author has reasons for limiting his work to this specific era. In fact, many icons before and after Rublev only represent rudimentary structures or even a simple stacking of modules. (We will speak later on about these basic units which were used to give proper proportions to the human body.) Let us look now at how 15th and 16th centuries painters respected the structures of their icons.

For the icon of St. John the Baptist in the Annunciation Cathedral, Moscow, 1405, (figure 10), the great master Theophane the Greek used a board with proportions of 1:2; the choice was rather rare for Russian icons of the deisis row. The image was probably constructed in the following way. By drawing a horizontal axis dividing the board into equal parts, Theophane obtained two squares as well as the centers of two semi-circles. The two intersection points where the semi-circles crossed provided the vertical axis for the composition. By dividing this axis into three parts, Theophane obtained the three squares of the traditional structure. In the upper square, we have the bust and the leaning position of the head which follows the diagonal line of the square. The base of this first square indicates the place of the elbows and the hands. The center square contains the middle section of St. John's body. The space in this square is completely taken up by St. John's cloak. The folds on the left accent the vertical. The folds on the knees climb slightly toward the back and give the figure a flexible balance which supports the gesture of respect and veneration. The upper line of the pedestal, represented as the ground on which St. John is standing, passes through the intersection points of the semi-circles and the sides of the squares.

By structuring the icon in this way, the Greek master was able to give to the whole work a pleasant distribution of volumes and empty spaces. In this simple and logical design, Theophane succeeded in uniting both the monumental character and the flexibility of movement.

In Russia, iconographers had a great reverence for Theophane's art, and even if we are not ready to consider him to be the master of the new generation in the 14th century, we cannot deny that he brought with him from Constantinople the new forms and conceptions of Palaeologue art. What is more, his art was the expression of hesychastic spirituality which was determinant for Orthodoxy. The Russian masters were, however, also the inheritors of the great national centers of art such as Novgord, Moscow, Vladimir, and Suzdal. There are therefore two sources of inspiration which were also expressed in the icons of the time.

The icons of the Vladimir cathedral, 1408, which were painted by Andrei Rublev, Theophane's student or companion, already show a new conception. It is not unreasonable then to suppose that Rublev determined the structure of the icons on the deisis and that the other painters of his workshop executed the work according to the requirements of each saint.

The icon of St. John the Baptist, even if it has been greatly restored, as we presently have it, remains characteristic of Rublev's work. (figure 11) In contrast to Theophane's icon, proportions of 1:2, Rublev used the proportions of 1:3 for his surface and thus immediately obtained the three squares of the Byzantine model. The figures thus fill the space more completely and seem to be closer to the spectator. The parts of the body are drawn according to the Byzantine structure except for (1) the left hand holding the parchment which is found on the horizontal axis and (2) the two feet which occupy the space of the rectangle with a width of ¼ of the base. The artistic conception is however very different from Theophane's; Theophane used the monumental style while Rublev preferred movement and gesture. The contour and the folds are integrated into the movement of the figure and thus become part of the theological meaning of the icon.

Rublev modified his composition of the Virgin which is found on the same iconostasis. (figure 12) In the middle square, he inscribed a circle, and by drawing diagonal lines, he obtained the four points of a smaller square inside the circle. He then divided the upper edge of the square in four. By connecting A and B (at the height of the small squares) with C and D, Rublev drew a trapezoid in which the outline of the Virgin fit perfectly. The contour of the clothing in the lower part of the icon is somewhat recessed because of the movement of the bust, but it is equally found on the line DD1.

One of Rublev's last works shows the degree to which the board's proportion influenced the structure of the composition itself. In the icon of St. Paul on the iconostasis of Holy Trinity Cathedral in Zagorsk (figure 13), the board does not have the proportions of 1:3, like at Vladimir, but of 2:5. This is due to the proportions of the building itself which determined those of the whole iconostasis as well as of each icon. The master drew the vertical and the horizontal axes, and at their intersection, he drew a circle whose diameter is equal to the width of the board. To obtain the four points of a square, he divided the right angles in two and was able to draw diagonal lines. It was then easy to add the upper and lower squares which gave the traditional Byzantine structure. In the upper square, Rublev inscribed the bust following the quarter circle drawn from a center found on the lower left corner of the upper square; the tilt of the bust is determined by the diagonal line in the upper square. In the middle square, the artist inscribed a second circle with its own

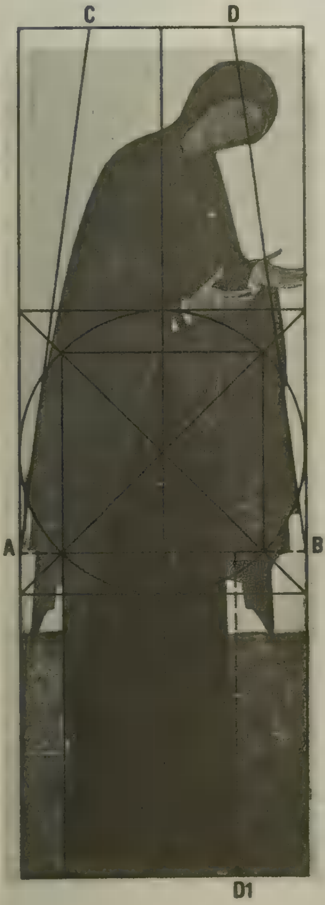


Fig. 12

The Virgin: *Rublev Workshop, 1408, Vladimir Cathedral, (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 313 x 106 cm.).*

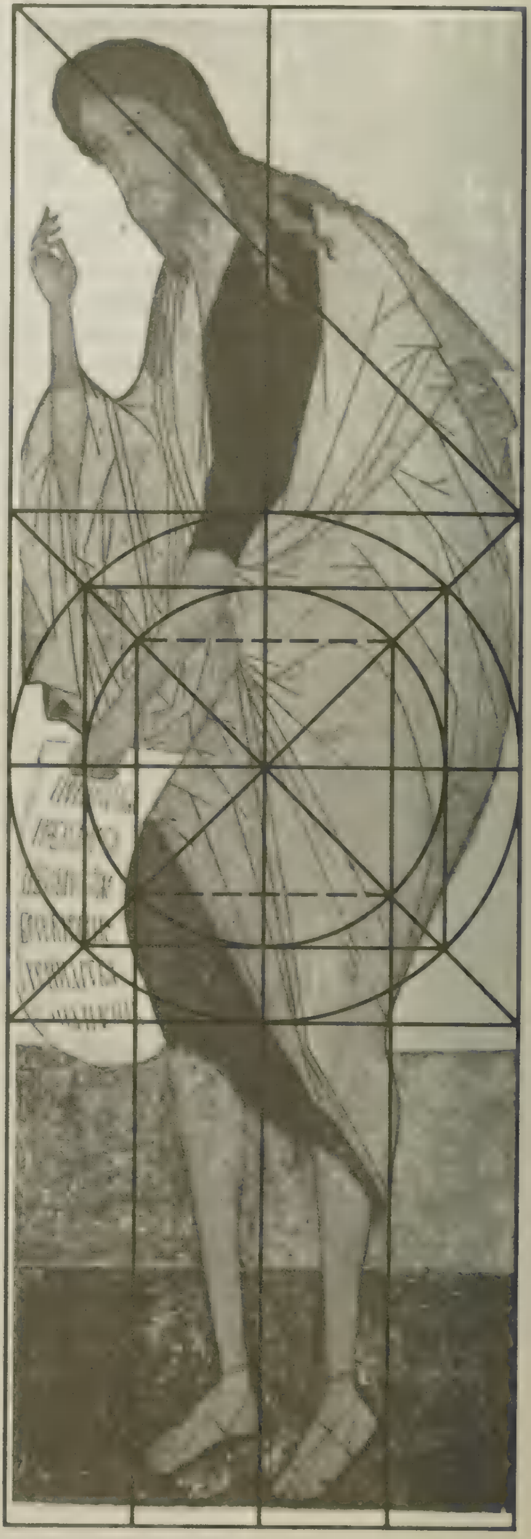


Fig. 11
St. John the Baptist:
Rublev, 1408, Vladimir Cathedral, (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 313 x 105 cm.).

square inside. This inner square determined the width of the figure which itself is ½ of the width of the icon.

Here as in the Vladimir cathedral, the other icons of the iconostasis were executed by disciples according to the master's "blue print," and this assured the unity of the whole work.

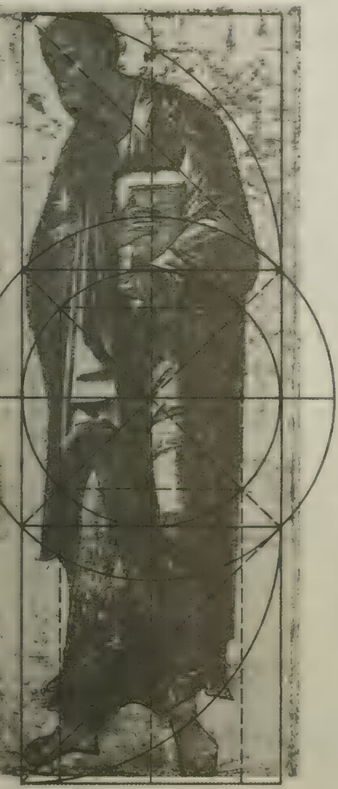


Fig. 13
St. Paul the Apostle:
Rublev, 1425-27, Trinity Cathedral, Zagorsk (189 x 83 cm.).

Geometric Structures For Festal Icons: Cross, Grid, and Circle

The icons of the major feasts in which several persons are often represented in movement require a larger format approaching that of a square. But when the format changes, the geometric structures must also be modified. Square icons, however, are rare (for example the Holy Face, 12th century in the Tretyakov Gallery) no doubt because the persons, being painted in a standing position, require more height than width. In order to make a good composition, the painter had to have a sound knowledge of the Bible and also to know the traditional way of representing the event; finally, of course, he had to know and understand the spiritual meaning of the event.

The Cross

The Ascension icon (Moscow School, 15th century, Tretyakov Gallery) is a good example of this kind of work. (figure 14) The master divided the icon's surface, approximate proportions of 5:6, into three equal parts both vertically and horizontally and thus obtained a cross. In the upper part, he drew Christ inside a large mandorla, held by two angels, and the whole forms an isosceles triangle. In the middle section, we find the busts of the apostles, and that of the Virgin in the center. The lower part is filled by garments and feet. Despite this geometric structure, the painter took certain liberties: the centers of the Virgin's and Christ's halos are not found on the vertical axis, and the two groups of apostles do not form exactly symmetrical groupings. The figures' movement and gestures, however, require such a structural flexibility. We are not dealing here with amateurish imperfections; the colors, the light, and the delicate execution of the faces, on the contrary, show the hand of a master.

The Grid

From the Rublev workshop, we have the Nativity icon, 15th century in the Tretyakov Gallery. (figure 15 and plate

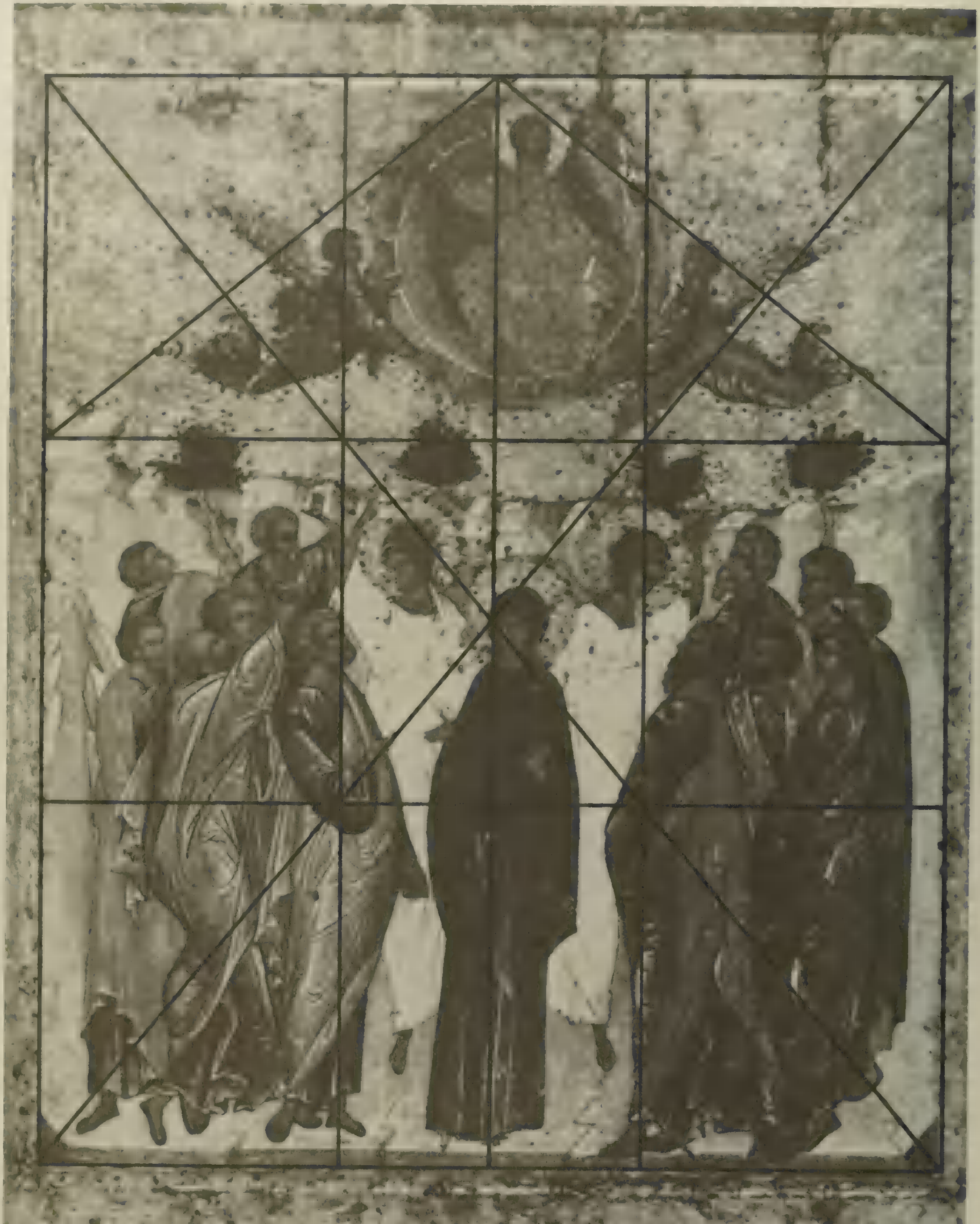


Fig. 14
***The Ascension:** Moscow School, 15th c. (Tretyakov Gallery, 71 x 59 cm.).*

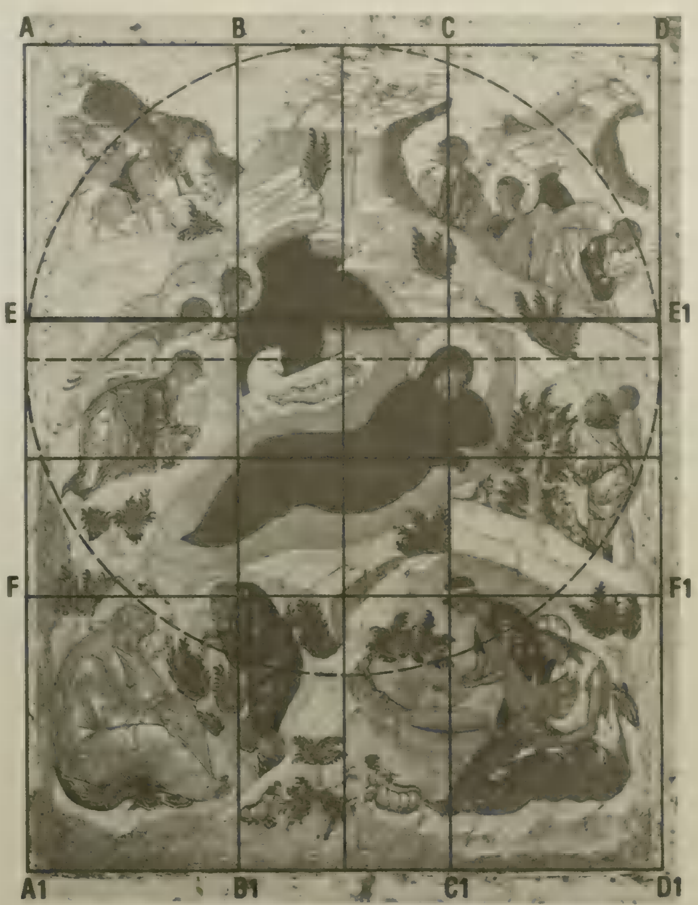


Fig. 15
The Nativity of Christ:
Rublev School, beginning of the 15th c. (Tretyakov Gallery, 71 x 54 cm.).

20) Its format is higher and its proportions are nearly 3:4. The icon's high artistic quality, the expertise of the drawing, and the richness of its coloring place this work among the most beautiful of all Russian icons. Here also the structure seems to be a cross, two vertical lines and two horizontal ones, but because the rectangles at the corners of the icon contain important elements, we can legitimately view this composition as a grid of nine rectangles.

The upper row contains the star in the center, the Wise Men on the left, and the angels on the right; we might call this the prophetic row. The middle row represents the heart of the mystery: the Christ-Child whose cradle already suggests the grave, the Virgin lying on a royal couch, and the angels and sheperds in adoration. The real center of the icon is the Christ-Child's head which is on the axis of vertical symmetry and connects the star, the Child, and Mary's womb. Is this feature a mere accident or the artist's way of drawing attention to the meaning of the event? The center of the Child's

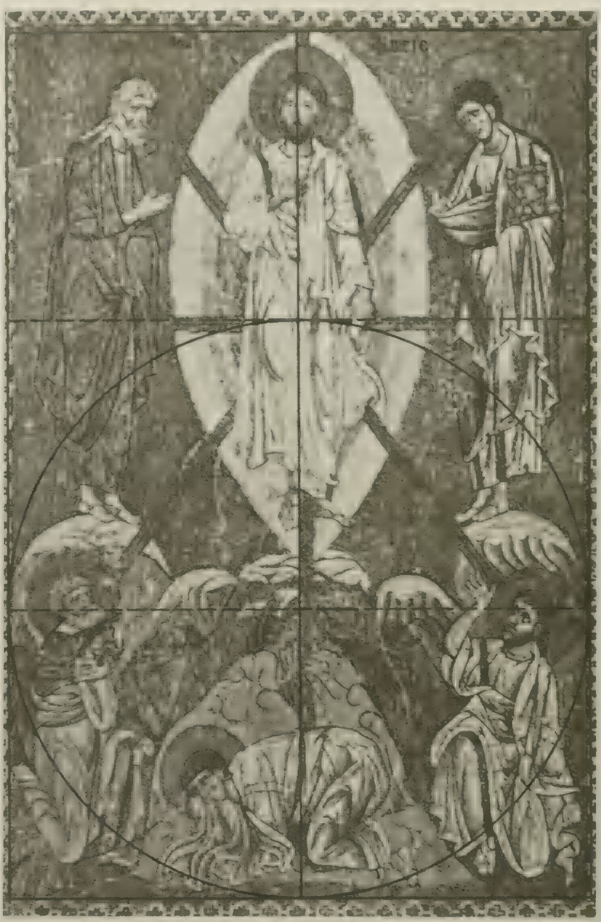


Fig. 16
The Transfiguration:
mosaic, Constantinople, end of the 12th c., the Louvre, Paris (52 x 36 cm.).

halo is at a distance of 1/2 the width of the icon, measuring down from the top edge. The center of the Virgin's halo, as we have already noted, is found at the same height as that of the Child's and also on the line CC' which is drawn vertically at a distance of 1/3 of the icon's width.

The lower row shows the human aspect of the scene: on the left, we see St. Joseph who represents human thought which has never been able to understand that this little Child is God incarnate; on the right, we have the maternal reality of the birth represented by the midwives. In the middle rectangle, we have the rocks, the bare earth, and the empty cave. We are struck by the clearness and the logic of this composition; it invites us to deep meditation.

The Circle

We must now deal with the last structural form, the circle. We have already seen it on a Byzantine icon of the

Transfiguration from the 12th century. (figure 16) Its proportions are 2:3. Following the logic of the scene, the master has drawn the three apostles in the two lower squares; as for the transfigured Christ and the two prophets, they fit perfectly in the circle inscribed in the four upper squares. The whole has a surprising rigor.

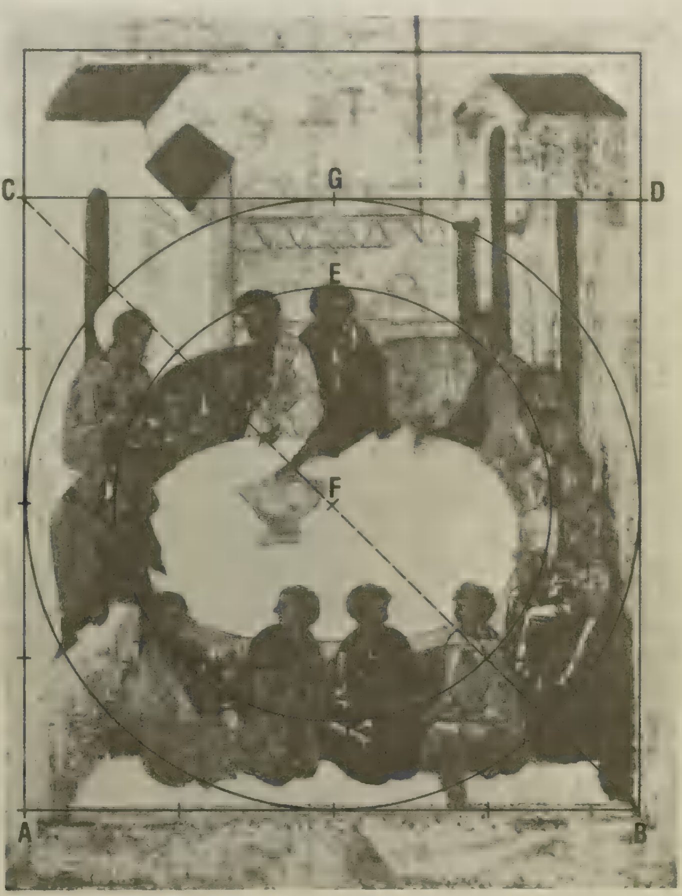


Fig. 17
***The Mystical Supper:** Prokhor of Gorodetz, 1405, Annunciation Cathedral, Moscow (80 x 61 cm.).*

A circle is often inscribed in the square formed by using the base, as we see in the Russian icon of the Mystical Supper in the Annunciation Cathedral, Moscow, 1405; this icon was painted by one of Rublev's co-workers, Prokhor of Gorodetz. (figure 17) By drawing a quarter circle with its center at A and having a radius equal to the line AB, the painter obtained the point C; by redoing the same exercise but from the center B, the painter obtained the point D. The intersection of the diagonal lines AD and CB forms the center F which serves as the center of a circle drawn with the radius FG, and this is equal to 1/2 of the base AB. Another circle using the center F this time passes through the point E which is the intersection point of the two quarter circles AC and BD. Inside these two circles, Prokhor drew the Lord and his apostles united in the celebration of the eucharist.

Twenty years later, another master painted the same Mystical Supper according to the same structure in the Holy Trinity Monastery. He also used two circles, but he grouped the persons in a different manner. The icon is not a copy but a new interpretation.

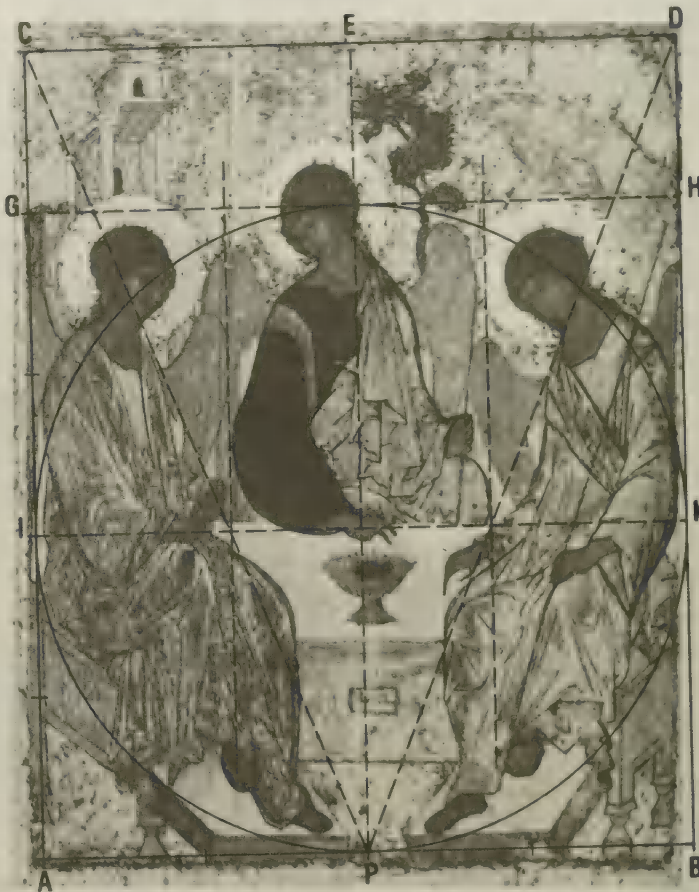


Fig. 18
***The Trinity:** Rublev, 1411, Trinity Cathedral, Zagorsk (Tretyakov Gallery, 142 x 114 cm.).*

The circle is once again used as the basic structure for the Transfiguration, the Baptism of Christ, and especially Rublev's famous Holy Trinity icon, 1411?, Tretyakov Gallery. (figure 18 and plate 29) It is in this icon, by means of the circle, that the theological meaning, the movement of the colors, and the graphic lines find their purest expression.

The igumen of the monastery had asked Rublev to represent the Trinity as the source and example of all unity. According to tradition, the three heavenly persons came to visit Abraham and to announce the birth of his son; they symbolized the Persons of the Trinity. Rublev stayed within this tradition but by underplaying the historical aspect of the story, he represented only the three Persons in their interpersonal exchanges. To express their unity, the master drew them in a circle.

The board on which the icon is painted has the proportions 4:5. Rublev first of all determined the vertical axis dividing the surface in half. Then he formed a square by tracing an arc from the center A, the lower left hand corner, having a radius equal to the base of the icon AB; the arc rose toward and stopped at point G. The same thing was done using the lower right hand corner B as the center of another arc rising toward and stopping at point H. In the square thus formed, diagonal lines were drawn, and at their intersection we have the center from which Rublev was able to inscribe a circle, the basic structure of the composition. Through this center also passed the horizontal axis IK. He then traced two diagonal lines from the middle of the base P toward points C and D. In the two triangles formed in the two lower corners, the two side angels were later painted. The two parallel vertical lines drawn from the intersection points of the diagonal lines PC and PD with the horizontal axis IK determined the space for the middle angel.

The halos of the side angels are inscribed in the rectangles and touch the sides of the square; the center of the middle angel's halo is on the circle.

Despite this symmetrical structure, Rublev's design has a great deal of suppleness, and the figures often go beyond their geometric limits. The head of the left angel is thus slightly raised because the central angel is leaning toward him. The hand gestures are also different because they are part of each Person's individuality, of his function in the whole. Even if we eliminate all theological interpretation, the angel on the right has an attitude of humble acceptance while the attitude of the two others is more active. For Rublev, the circular structure was only an aid in balancing the subject, and the circle lost its importance as soon as the movement or the theological meaning no longer required it.

In his study, A. A. Titz tried to be more detailed in an analysis of the elements of the composition by using a system of arcs. It is sometimes difficult to follow his explanations because the points he referred to lack precision. Besides, his system seems too complicated to have been conceived of ahead of time. This is all the more so because the parts he points out are not important at all for the whole, either for the theological meaning or for the aesthetic appreciation.

The scientific studies carried out on the compositional and structural principles of icons as well as the analyses that we have been able to make on other icons allow us to propose the following conclusions.

1. The great masters of Byzantine art composed their designs according to geometric structures so as to obtain a proper balance of the subject.

2. The structure was not strictly observed, especially when the subject required some alteration: the structure suppressed neither the movement nor the expression.

3. The artists first of all determined the center of the halo and from there, the head. This center is an important point for the whole composition, and is its key.

4. Standing figures were drawn according to the structure of three vertical squares.

5. The different structural forms depended on the proportions of the board surface to be painted.

6. The festal icons were often drawn on the basis of a square which used the length of the icon's base as the measure for the square's sides.

Chapter 7:

The Proportions of the Human Body

Introduction

The representation of the human body has always played an important role in art; this figurative element, however, is the very essence of iconography. Christian painting, in fact, deals with only one subject: the human person, body and soul incarnate. Orthodox iconography does not attempt to represent the human person in his cultural or historical context, nor does it attempt to paint heavenly beings in human form as was done by the artists of the Renaissance.

Iconography has another attitude toward the human body. Its goal is to understand the Christian faith by using certain cultural and historical elements of Byzantine civilization.

The ancient world was fascinated by the beauty of the human body. That beauty derived not only from the harmony of proportions, movements, and forms, but also from the participation in the divine. As Plotinus expressed it, "the arts do not directly copy visible objects but ascend to the reasons from which the natural object was born." (1)

For classical Greece, the ideal of beauty was determined by Pythagorian doctrine: "Everything is arranged by number." This idea was based on the discovery of the mathematical relations in harmonies. For Pythagorianism, the musical intervals of an octave, a fifth, and a fourth proved that nature answered to mathematical thought and that beauty resulted from the union of the two.

To really grasp and appreciate beauty, it was necessary to

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1. Plotinus, *Enneades*, V, VIII, 1, t. 5, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1931, p. 136.

decode phenomena, decompose them into their numerical relationships. Beauty was thus subordinated to a numerical structure, and astronomy along with geometry were the keys to that structure.

In fact, the art works of ancient times, such as the Doryphorus of Polyclitus, show that the artists used numbers to regulate the relations between the different parts of the human body. On this question, Gallienus put these words in Chrisyppus' mouth:

> *Beauty consists in the harmonious proportions of the parts, the proportions of one finger to another, of all the fingers to the rest of the hand, of the hand to the wrist, of the wrist to the forearm, of the forearm to the whole arm, and finally all the parts to all the others as it is written in the canon of Polyclitus.*

During the centuries, great minds such as Plato, Vitruvius, Augustine, Boethius, and Leonardo da Vinci tried to establish a canon of beauty that had the golden number as its basic principle.

For antiquity, unfortunately, the texts and drawings which demonstrate these theories are very rare, and it was only at the time of the Italian Renaissance that any echos of them were heard.

The Byzantine Unit Of Measure: The Module

After centuries of persecution, Christianity had little in common with the pagan world, neither in its theology nor in its morality. (2) And when it turned to ancient philosophy to rediscover that pagan world's thought as "logos spermatikos" — Word in the form of seeds — aesthetics was not the center of its interest. Concerning art, the memory of the Old Testament interdiction was still too strong to allow any development of figurative art. Even if ancient art was widely admitted in the catacombs, we do not find there an illusionist painting whose goal was the exaltation of physical beauty but rather, only simple symbols.

In the same way, the conception of a world mutilated by sin and called to be transfigured by grace was too far from the pagan idea of a cosmos harmonized by numbers. Thus

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2. Since the publication of this book in 1981, the results of historical research have shown that this statement should not be so categorical. To express its faith, the Church made use of certain elements in the pagan world. In addition, the prohibition of the 2nd Commandment against idolatry did not lead to an absolute refusal of the image. (Author's comment)

despite the influence of Neo-Platonism in other areas, Byzantine art soon lost hold of the ancient canon of beauty. Instead of seeking mathematical relations between the different parts of the body, Christian artists sought harmony based on one simple basic unit: the module. This new canon of measure took its distance from the Hellenistic view of idealized nature in order to find the image of the new man. More and more, this new man went beyond the world of three dimensions to reflect a world where there were no dimensions at all.

The module system had other consequences also; it simplified the composition of figures and promoted a unity among various works. It was also a simple workshop technique. In the West, the manuscript of Villard de Honnecourt at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris illustrates this practical aspect very well. The module very rapidly began to exercise a great influence on the whole of Byzantine art; by the fact that it established a simple and clear canon of measure, the module became dominant everywhere and thus produced a stable tradition.

Despite often heterogeneous influences, Byzantine art was able to keep its distinctive character through many centuries, and this thanks to the module.

After the rejection of the Hellenistic canon, the problem of proportions still had to be resolved. The module could not be just a simple "mechanical" unit: if all the proportions were to have a meaning, the module had to have its place in their determination. In the search for a new canon, two ideas played an important role: the first had its origins in Hellenistic conceptions and was certainly influenced by Neo-Platonism. Man cannot be limited to his natural dimensions; he is essentially a "supernatural" being. The artist's job is to show man as an archetype in his relations with the eternal world. In order to accomplish this task, the artists used the circle as a symbolic measurement and its radius, which became the module, was used first of all for the head and then for the whole body.

The second key idea was of a theological and spiritual nature. The icons which show circular structures most clearly are those of the Lord's Face. This icon was of the greatest importance for the whole of Orthodox iconography. During the iconoclastic period, the Orthodox used the icon of the Holy Face to defend themselves against the iconoclasts. Precisely because this icon preserved features of the Lord Jesus, God incarnate, Christians had the right to represent God and the saints, despite the interdiction of the Old Testament. All Orthodox iconography has its origins in the understanding of this icon. These two ideas thus form the mysterious basis of all icons: God became man and man rises towards eternity.

The Proportions of the Body

Here we have a text on proportions found in a manual of Mount Athos:

> *Learn, Oh my student, that the body of man has nine heads in height, that is, nine units of measure from the forehead to the heels. To start with, make the first measurement so that the head is divided into three parts: the forehead for the first, the nose for the second, and the beard for the third. Draw the hair of the head beyond the limit of the head letting it extend out to the length of a nose. Divide once again in three parts the space between the beard and the nose; use two units of measure for the chin; use one for the mouth; and the throat should be as long as one nose. Continuing on, from the chin to the middle of the body, there are three units of measure and two other units down to the knees; from the knees to the ankle bone, two measures; and then from the ankle bone to the heel, one length of a nose. From the larynx to the shoulder, one measure also; the same for the other shoulder. For the roundness of the shoulder, one measure; from the carpal bones to the fingernails, one measure; another measure to the end of the fingers. The two eyes are equal to each other, and the space that separates them from one another is equal to the width of one eye. When the head is painted in profile, make the distance of two eyes between the eye and the ear; if the head is facing fully forward, the space of one eye is used. The ear must be equal to the nose. When the man is naked, use a space of four noses for the half of his width; when he is dressed, the width of the chest is one and a half measures; the belt must be raised to the elbows.* (3)

In the manual that the iconographer Nicholas Grechny received from his Old Believer ancestors, the canon is somewhat different especially as regards the numerous ascetical explanations:

> *The head is equal to 1/7 of the whole length of the body… From the top of the head to the chin, we count four lengths; from the chin to the clavicle, one length; from the clavicle to the dimple of the diaphragm, three lengths; from there to the navel, three lengths; from the navel to the pubic area, also three lengths. From the top of the head to the pubic area, we count fourteen lengths, that is one half of the human body.*
>
> *This has two meanings: a) only he who has a pure heart*

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3. In *Manuel d'iconographie chrétienne*, introduction and notes by Adolhe Didron, French translation by Paul Durand, Burt Franklin, New York, 1963 (First French edition: Paris, 1845, pp. 52-53).

> *will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, and b) it is in the flesh that the Christian carries on the most difficult battle but also the most glorious one...*
>
> *The two extended arms, from the tips of one hand to the tips of the other, represent twenty-eight lengths of a nose which correspond to the total length of the body; this means that men must nourish their bodies by the work of their arms. Besides, this width of two extended arms is equal to one side of the equilateral triangle whose point is situated a bit below the heel, which means that the Trinity of God has been restored in us on the cross... (4)*

These two canons speak of measurements based on the height of the head and the length of the nose, but they do not mention any structural system of circles as claimed in the works of Panovsky and Onasch. (5)

It is probable that this structure was quickly forgotten by most of the iconographers. Constituted by this interplay of circles, the structure only appeared in its most rigorous form in the icons of the masters. (6) Painters therefore continued to use the compass for determining the proportions of the parts of the body as in the story told by Didron concerning the monk Joasaph on Mount Athos and as the manual of Dionysius of Fourna describes. (7) It is the technique of the preceding centuries faithfully transmitted from one generation to another.

The essential aspect of the Byzantine canon, however, does not lie in a fixed number of modules but in the relations between the parts of the body. These relations are expressed by the modules in planimetry, that is measurements made on a two-dimensional surface.

When we compare the icons of different ages, we see that the proportions of the human body have changed. Thus the Christ of Mount Sinai, (12th century) (figure 19) has rather heavy forms, perhaps under oriental influences: the size of the head represents 1/7 of the body, the arms and legs are short, and the shoulders and bust are wide.

The Baptism of Christ, (14th century), is only taller by ½ of a height, but the fact that Christ is represented without clothing, according to tradition, allows us to see the human anatomy; we thus have the impression that he is more elongated. (figure 20)

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4. Ernest Dejaifve, *Les Saintes Icones*, Editions de l'abbaye de Chevetogne, Chevetogne, 1965, p. 63.

5. Erwin Panovsky, "Die Entwicklung der Proportionslehre als Abbild der Stilentwicklung," *Monatshefte fuer Kunswissenschaft*, Konrad Onasch, Icones, Kister, Geneva, 1961, pp. 35ff.

6. The same remark was made previously, in chapter 6, III, "The Circle," concerning geometric structures.

7 *Manuel d'iconographie chretienne*, pp. 53 and 61-66.

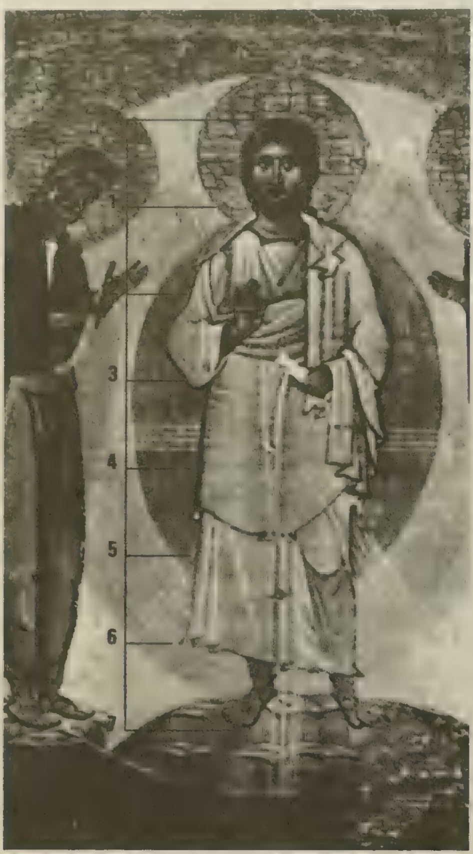

Fig. 19
The Transfiguration: *Sinai, 12th c.*

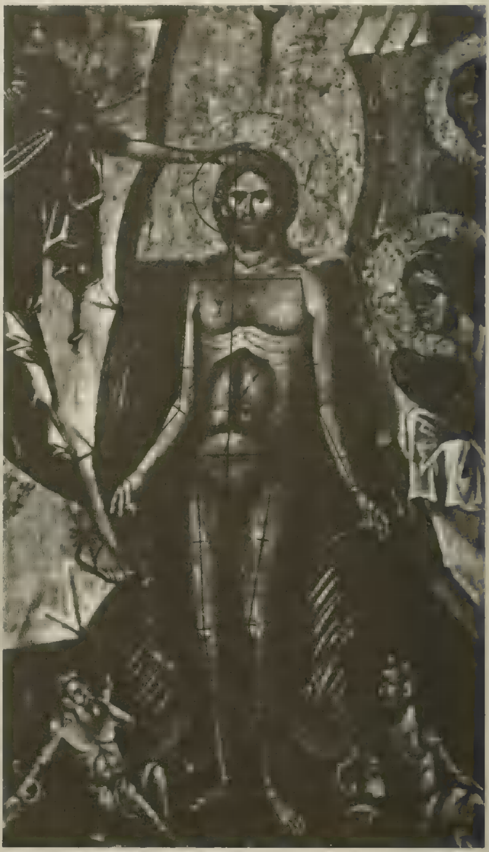

Fig. 20
The Baptism of Christ, Greek icon, Jerusalem, 14th c.

From the 14th century on, the human body was painted in an elongated form. For Theophane the Greek, Christ had proportions of 1:8 (figure 21); according to the Novgorod school, Christ had proportions of 1:9; and in the icons of the master Dionysius, the saints went beyond the proportions of 1:10. The elbows are found at the height of three units, and it is not the bust but the lower part, especially the legs, that are elongated. This part of the body went from four units in icons of Christ from the 12th century to seven units in the works of Dionysius. (figure 23) By comparing the figures with each other, we can see that each age found a harmonious way to represent all the proportions, and this thanks to the module used differently each time.

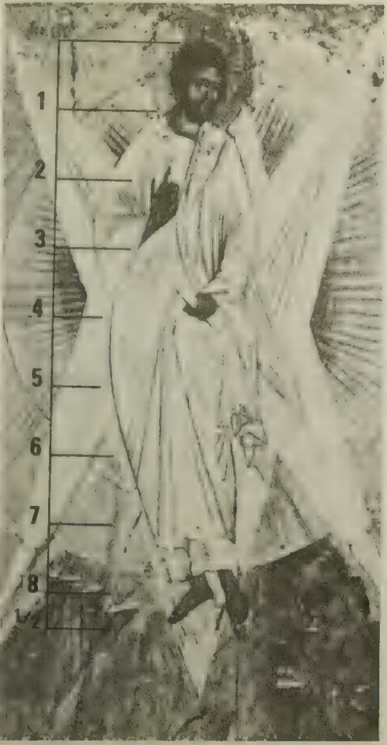

Fig. 21
The Transfiguration:
Theophane the Greek, end of the 14th c.

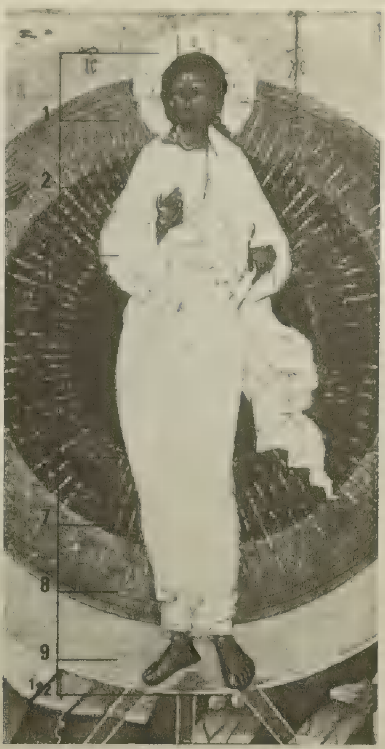

Fig. 22
The Transfiguration:
Novgorod School, 15th c.

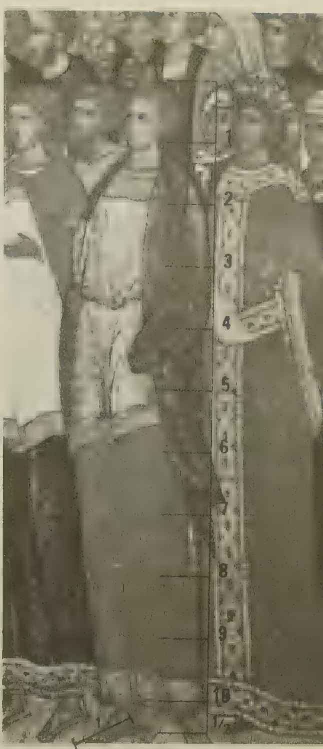

Fig. 23
"In Thee, All Creatures Rejoice"*, detail, saints:*
Master Dionysius or another Dionysius, beginning of the 16th c.

The Proportions Of The Face: The Theory Of The Three Circles

For the proportions of the face and its details, the Byzantine iconographer also used the module which was always equal to the length of the nose. The head was thus inscribed in two circles with the halo often being determined by a third. The center of the circles was found at the root of the nose, between the two eyes. This is probably why this part of the nose is drawn in a very special way in Byzantine art. The root of the nose is also the center of the head and the seat of wisdom. (figures 24, 25, and 26)

Panovsky's theory of the three circles no doubt has its origins in a manuscript of the early 13th century found in the State Library of Hamburg. It is the only medieval witness that clearly explains the proportions of the face and the head by using this structure. Even if the manuscript is western, its inspiration is obviously Byzantine. Thus its value is all the greater.

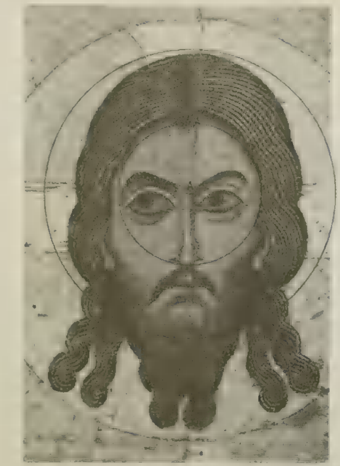

Fig. 24
The Holy Face Not-Made-by-Human-Hands: *Novgorod, 12th c.*

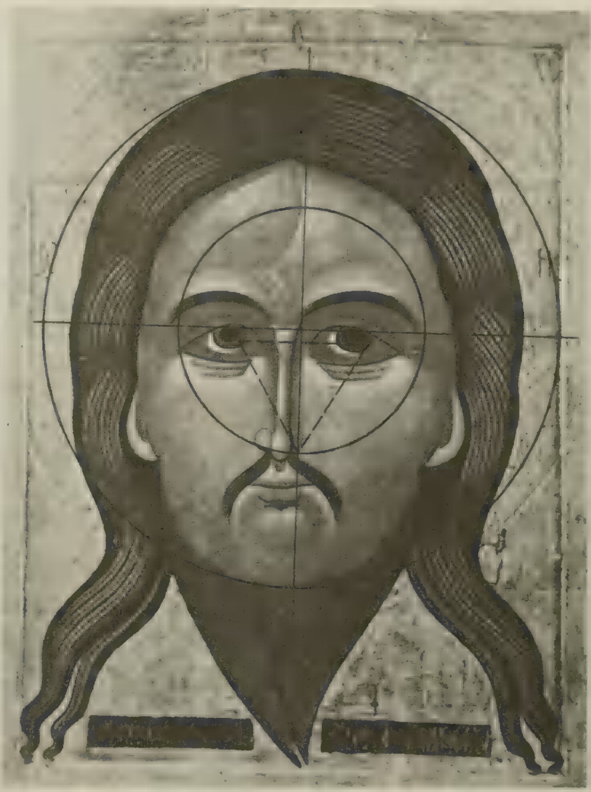

Fig. 25
The Saviour with a Wet Beard: *Novgorod, 15th c.*

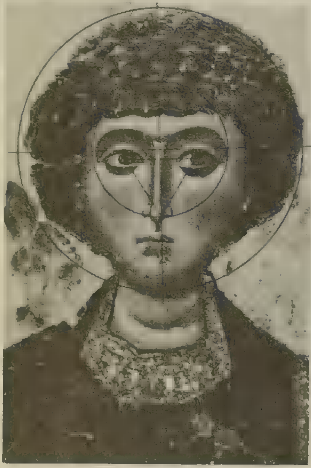

Fig. 26
St. Panteleimon: *Mount Athos, Lavra Monastery, 12th c.*

The best argument in favor of this structure seems to be an analysis of the icons themselves. The circular structure is an aid for the artist without being the necessary condition of the design. In the end though, the structure shows itself as the mysterious ground of the icon's harmony.

The icon of the Saviour, 12th century in the Tretyakov Gallery (figure 24), shows this structure; the first circle which has the radius of the length of the nose creates the space for the eyes and the forehead. The circle whose radius is two lengths of the nose determines the volume of the head. The halo, by contrast, does not correspond to the third circle but is displaced toward the bottom because it encircles both the beard and the hair and must be inscribed in the format of the icon. This icon of the Saviour is one of the rare types of a square icon. (8)

The second icon called "the Saviour with the Wet Beard," is a variation on the theme of the Holy Face. (figure 25) The face is bigger than the first circle probably because of the large

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8. *Acheiropoetos* means "not made by human hands."

eyes, but the head is perfectly inscribed in the space of the second circle. The halo is smaller also due to the dimensions of the board. (9)

The pupils of the eyes are often placed at 1/2 of a module from the circle's center, the root of the nose. This operation produces an equilateral triangle and gives the face its harmony and delicate quality.

The face of St. Panteleimon, in the Greek icon of the 12th century, seems larger than the two preceding ones. (figure 26) In reality, the triangle has nearly the same proportions but is drawn on a smaller face, and thus the distance from the eyes to the center is slightly greater than 1/2 of a module. (Compare figures 25 and 26)

Up until the beginning of the 18th century, this tri-circular structure determined the faces on many icons. Later on, artists seemed to have forgotten it. The naturalist influence of the West became dominant. The faces became heavy and flat, and they lost the harmony and the brilliance of ancient icons.

The representation of the face in full frontal position did not seem to present a problem to the medieval painters. They did have problems, however, when they had to draw 3/4 of the face or when the head was tilted. In fact, painters did not conceive of the subject as an organism, free and mobile in space but rather as the subject's projection onto a two-dimensional surface on which several aspects of the subject were represented. These various aspects were only possible from different points of view. The planimetric conception was typical of medieval art in Byzantium as well as in the West. It was to lead to phenomena such as the famous inversed perspective.

Among the many variations on the theme of 3/4 profiles, variations which are due to the tilt of the head and to the determination of the circles' centers, let us analyse two icons: the Virgin of the Don by Theophane the Greek and St. Michael the Archangel by Rublev. (figures 27 and 28) In the first, the Virgin's head exactly covers the space of the circle having two nose modules as its radius, as with faces seen in full frontal position. In a frontal view, the center of the circle, the root of the nose, is found at position A; in Theophane's icon, however, the root of the nose, the center, is moved one module to the left, to position B on the first circle. The axis of the nose forms a right angle with the axis of the eyes because the face is not conceived in depth or in relief but in planimetry, that is projected onto a two-dimensional surface. Sometimes the distance between the eyes and the

9. *Spas mokraia boroda* means "the Saviour with a wet beard," an expression which describes this icon very well since it shows an exaggerated way of drawing.

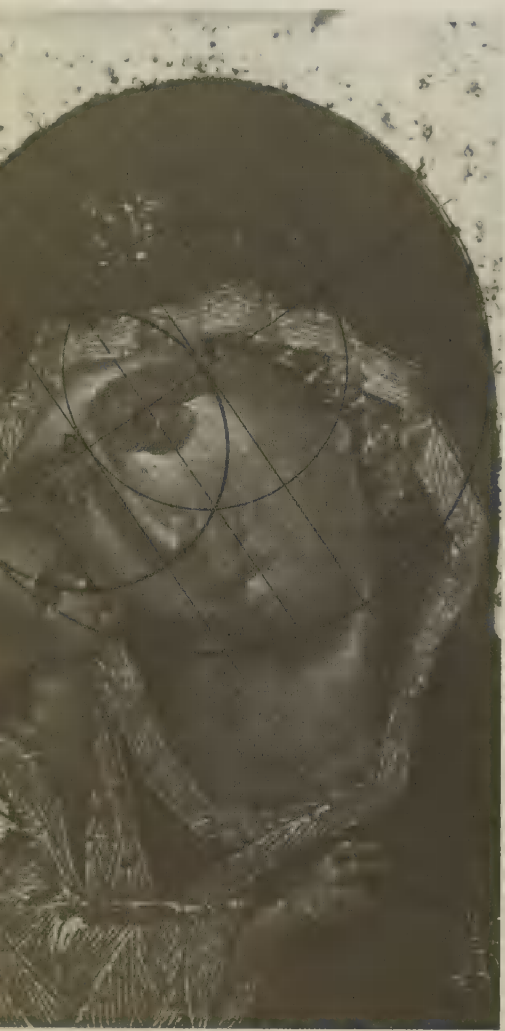

Fig. 27
The Don Mother of God:
Theophane the Greek,
14th c.

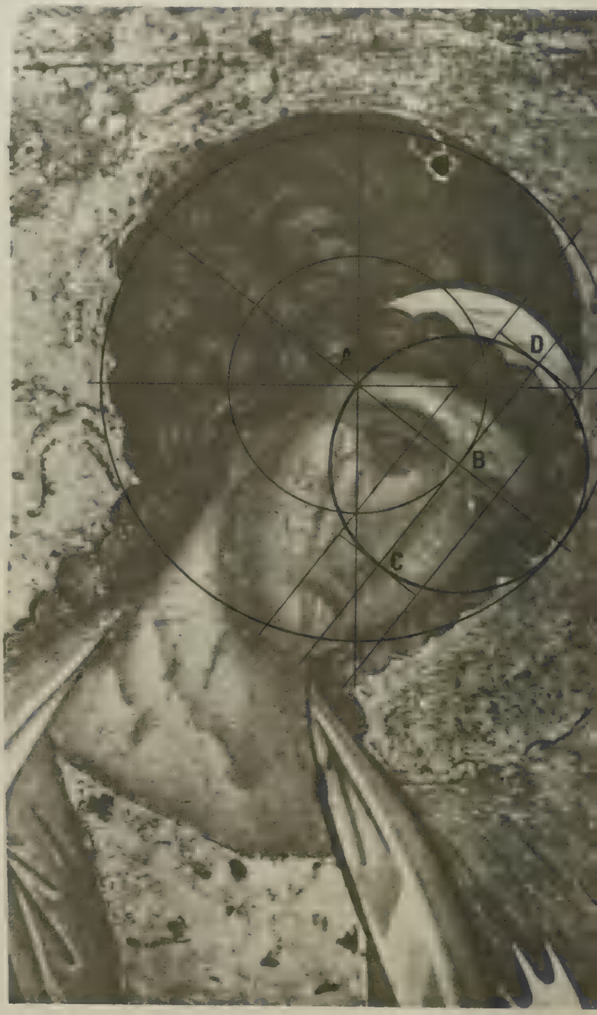

Fig. 28
St. Michael the Archangel:
Rublev, 1407.

center B is diminished, and it is often treated as though it were in a frontal position or 1/2 of a module. In this way, the planimetric view is even more accentuated. The chin and the forehead remain at the same distance from the nose as for a full frontal face: from the root of the nose up to the forehead, one modlue and from the tip of the nose to the chin, one module. The vertical measurements thus remain the same, and the horizontal measurements become simple fractions of the module. By representing icons in this way, the faces receive their transparent characteristic; they open themselves up to the spectator, and the curve of their heads becomes even more powerful and laden with divine wisdom.

The importance of volume in the heads painted by Rublev is probably explained by the phenomenon just described. The iconographer did not aim to be faithful to the outward appearance of things but, in terms of planimetry, he expressed spiritual values according to this structure.

Here we have no doubt the explanation of another phenomenon of Orthodox iconography: heads in profile are rare and poorly drawn. They indicate that the persons are less important and sometimes evil. The profiles on the icons of the Mystical Supper are striking. As they are set around the table, some of the apostles must turn their backs to the spectator, but a man without a visible face was inconceivable for Byzantine art. The painter therefore turned their heads as though they were facing the spectator. The only person shown in profile is Judas. The profile violates the circle and destroys its perfection.

In reality, numerous icons do not seem to conform strictly to these theories. It is perhaps difficult, therefore, to maintain that the structure of three circles was applied on all icons and that it was applied consciously, as Panovsky claims. However, numerous icons painted by the masters do show that it was used with precision up until the 18th century. Even modest works, by being grounded in the tradition, remained faithful to the planimetric conception. The module gave them this unity and harmony and made of these works a reflection of the Kingdom of God.

Our interest in a study of Byzantine modules and the three circle theory lies in the fact that these elements give us access to the ideal and nearly abstract world of Byzantine aesthetics. An "ideal and abstract world" does not mean a world cut off from the real. These terms mean simply that the artistic forms were restructured so as to reflect not the appearance or the material envelope of beings but their essence, their spiritual core, their eternal truth. We borrow the human form from natural reality, but we submit this form to a special geometric, rythmic, and chromatic system which is more capable of suggesting interiority, that is the spiritual and divine essence. (10)

Concerning icons, when we speak of the harmony of the transfigured body painted in icons, we in fact affirm a truth, but it is necessary to grasp the why and the how of this transfiguration, at least on the aesthetic level.

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10. Tania Velmans, "Les icônes de Bulgarie et la communauté culturelle byzantino-slave," *Icônes bulgares, IXe-XIXe siècles (catalogue of the exposition at the Petit Palais, Paris), Presse artistique, Paris, 1976.*

Chapter 8

The Icon and the Laws of Perspective

Introduction

In examining an icon, we are often struck by the strange architectural forms and distorted mountains; the walls of buildings and the rocks give the impression of moving toward the spectator. Objects seem to be seen from two sides, and in a space that has little depth; they do not have a stable position. (plate 20) Examining more closely, we also notice that parts of the human body as well as faces are drawn in a clumsy way, so it seems; it is as though the painter was incapable of drawing these details according to their natural form.

Now, even a rudimentary examination of Orthodox religious painting reveals so many artistic qualities and techniques that it is difficult to consider such works as the result of a primitive art. In fact, in these strange forms, we see a definite artistic intention, an intention which needs to be interpreted. In other words, far from being an expression of clumsiness, these forms were intentional, and they were understood as such by people of their era. We are, therefore, obliged, in our time, to consider them to be an artistic language by which the artists expressed the invisible reality they wished to translate into visible form. All these iconic forms try to represent space, and their strange character expresses the artist's conception of real space. The painters assumed the task of transposing the three dimensions of natural space onto the icon's two-dimensional board surface. This operation comes down to the same thing as working out a system of perspective.

Perspective is the projection of lines of space and of bodies onto a plane. Such an operation thus gives us the impression that the space extends behind the surface of the painting. This does not mean, however, that the projected space is identical with the illusion of reality. Today we are acquainted with several systems of perspective which vary with different historical cultures: Egypt, Greece, Byzantium, the Renaissance, India, etc. The same thing can be said for the conception of space in modern painting. All these systems represent reality in a different way and were automatically understood by the peoples for whom they were created. It would, therefore, be wrong to judge these systems only according to linear perspective and its derivative, modern central perspective. Each age had its own system for expressing its worldview according to its own particular methods. We are, thus, not justified in considering one system as closer to reality or superior to another.

What is more, perspective is not just a way of creating the illusion of space; it is also a symbolic form in itself. We must, therefore, decode its semantic character so as to discover the principles of its artistic language and thus to understand the reality that it tries to represent.

This decoding is all the more difficult since no known manuals of icon painting make allusion to the representation of space. From the aesthetic point of view, no manual indicates why buildings or objects were represented with such and such a deformation; from the technical point of view as well, no manual indicates how to construct geometric forms. We can suppose that the masters transmitted certain principles to their students who in turn applied them freely according to their imagination and the style of the time. This supposition seems to give an adequate explanation for the great differences we find among icons on this point.

The continuity of Byzantine art certainly played a great role as well. In fact, even after the fall of Constantinople, a time-honored tradition was preserved in the iconography of Crete, the Balkans, and especially Russia; this tradition transmitted a certain representation of space whose details had been precisely fixed. Because of the preservation of this tradition, painters as well as the faithful remained grounded in the same figurations, and by a reciprocal influence, the images themselves continued the ancient representation of space as long as the painters continued to see and paint the real world using the forms transmitted by the tradition. This state of affairs lasted until the appearance and dominance of occidental art. In westernized icons, such as those of the 17th century, we have the impression that they have lost their soul. And if we try to discover the reasons behind this phenomenon by an analysis of forms, we find that space was conceived in three-dimensional depth and that bodies and objects occupied this depth. Linear perspective changed the internal relations of the representation. We, thus, see the importance of a perspective that belongs exclusively to Orthodox iconography.

The Various Systems

The problem of westernization, the total absence of written historical sources, and the diversity in the representations of space on icons provide us with sufficient reasons to study the many theories of perspective that deal with icons. However, before dealing with this confusing diversity of theories and interpretations (even more confusing for our eyes that are used to other artistic structures), we need to examine in general terms the possibilities at our disposal for representing three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface.

Instead of proceeding in chronological order, we will begin by looking at the most familiar systems of representation and then move on to examine in more detail what makes up iconic perspective or perspectives.

Linear Perspective.

Let us, first of all, recall the principles of the perspective that we currently consider 'natural' perspective but which more appropriately should be called linear perspective, or as it is known today, modern central perspective. The discovery of this perspective is attributed to the sculptor and architect of the Renaissance, Brunelleschi who died in 1446. His theory was spread by his students Ghiberti, Masaccio, and Donatello and aroused great enthusiasm in the 15th and 16th centuries. During this period, men were preoccupied with discovering the laws which would permit them to represent the exterior world in the best way. Equally at this time, people thought that a subjective visual impression could serve as the basis for the construction of an objective world, that psychological space was transposable into mathematical space, and finally that art was capable of rising to the level of science. (1)

The representation of space in depth became possible due to a knowledge of the laws of vision which are based on the following natural phenomenon: straight parallel lines seem to cross in infinity at a point called the vanishing-point. (2) In order to represent space and objects in their real position and dimensions on a canvas, it is necessary to express the relations between three elements: 1) the spectator's eye, 2) the vanishing-point, and 3) the plane of the canvas. The spectator's eye, point V, is found in front of the vanishing-point at the same height as the horizon line. The eye is thus fixed and

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1. Erwin Panovsky, *La perspective comme forme symbolique (Perspective as a Symbolic Form)*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1975, p. 159.

2. The precise notion of the vanishing-point was not yet known by Renaissance artists

immobile. (3) The canvas' plane is conceived as a section of the pyramid formed by visual radii. Today , we conceive of it as the plane's projection; the center of the projection is the eye of Renaissance treatises. The line eye-vanishing-point thus passes through the canvas plane at the main point P. (figure 29) It is important to note that the movement starts from the spectator who enters into the represented world: the canvas is like an open window. By reproducing the distance eye-canvas-plane, on a diminished scale, on the canvas surface, we obtain the two points V-2 and P; starting from these two points, we can draw two scales: the vanishing scale of depth, and the transversal scale of width. (figure 30).

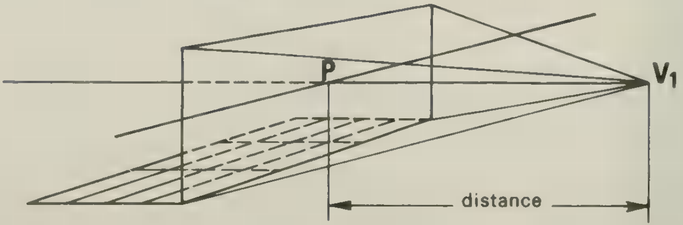
P
V_1
distance

Fig. 29

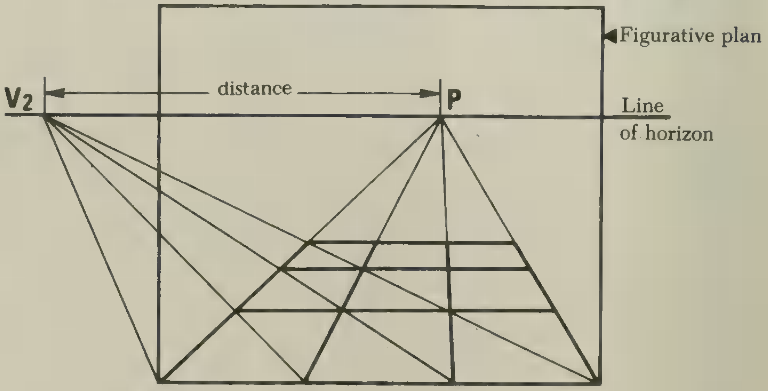
Figurative plan
V_2
distance
P
Line of horizon

Fig. 30 (horizon line and canvas plane).

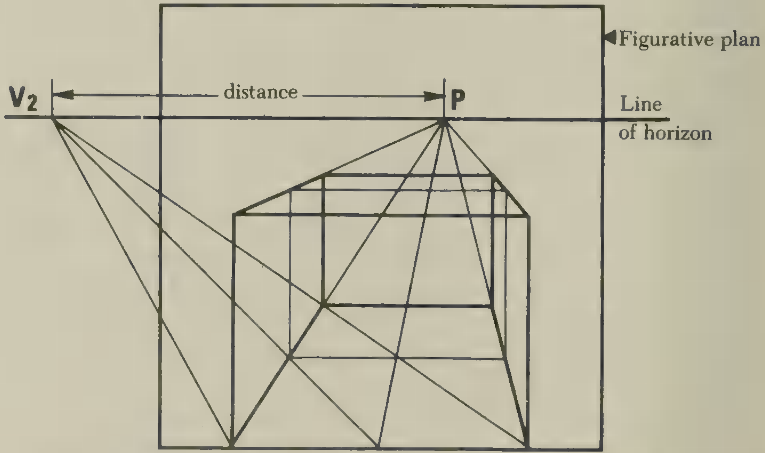
Figurative plan
V_2
distance
P
Line of horizon

Fig. 31 (horizon line and canvas plane).

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3. Renaissance painters also knew that a certain distance was required between the spectator and the painting to have the impression of distance.

If we want to obtain a three-dimensional perspective, a third scale must come into play, the scale of heights (figure 31); it is also necessary to plot the length of the vertical segments, reducing them because of the distance. By using these principles, an infinite number of structures in three-dimensional space is possible. The richness of this theory is well illustrated by the works of the following centuries.

This cursory presentation (4) of linear perspective brings out its characteristic elements, but above all it is a representation of spatial depth. We must be careful, however, not to consider linear perspective to be a simple instrument for creating a naturalistic illusion, a brilliant technique which "does violence to nature by excessive exercises," according to Vasari's reproach. Neither is it the only objective criteria for appreciating the artistic value of a work of art, as was the case for the Academy School of the 19th century.

The theory of linear perspective has been the subject of two types of criticism: 1) its subjectivism because it constructs a world on the basis of one point and thus turns veritable being into an ephemeral phenomenon, and 2) its rationalism because, by representing reality in a geometric system, linear perspective imposes a structure on being and thus destroys the freedom of imagination. These two objections, however, are nearly contradictory.

The reproaches of modern defenders of iconography go much farther. (5) Space in depth, or its visual appearance, is for them a negation of the essence of reality. The space of the image is the domain of the symbolico-dogmatic where the work of art itself accomplishes miracles. Linear perspective eliminates this aspect from religious art.

In fact, however, the icon *opens up a completely new domain, that of the "visionary" where miracle becomes an experience immediately lived by the spectator, where supernatural events so to speak irrupt into visual space, space which is apparently natural to the spectator, and "penetrates" him with their spirituality thanks to this very irruption. (6)*

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4. For a more exhaustive expose, see Pietro Reina, *la Prospettiva: leggi di prospettiva normale*, Garzanti, Milan, 1940, and Miloutine Borissalievitch, *La théorie de l'architecture*, Payot, Paris, 1926.

5. Certain authors who deal with iconography underline only the negative aspects of linear perspective: Leonid Ouspensky, *op. cit* p. 224; Panayotis A. Michelis, *Esthétique de l'art byzantin (The Aesthethics of Byzantine Art)*, Flammarion, Paris, 1959, pp. 180-203; Paul Evdokimov, *L'art de l'icône (The Art of the Icon)*, DDB, Paris, 1970, p. 191; and Gervase Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics*, J. Murray, London, 1962, p. 20. Pushed to its logical conclusion, such a position is equivalent to saying that Byzantine art and the icon are the only possible religious art.

6. Panovsky, p. 181.

We cannot help but think of the numerous mystics of the western Middle Ages. Their experience was properly characterized by this very vision of the supernatural world which appeared in natural forms. Panovsky's thesis, however, has not gone unchallenged. P. A. Michelis has properly noted that the infinity of the Renaissance is not the infinity of religion but rather the "materialized" infinity of the sciences. Very often, the artists of the Renaissance accentuated the foreground so as to avoid unlimited depth which was repugnant to their static conception of beauty. (7)

Perceptive Perspective

In a very short time, the artists of the Renaissance realized that linear perspective could not produce an image of space as we perceive it because such perspective was based on the visual principle of one single and immobile eye. Now natural vision takes place by using two eyes and by assimilating optical impressions through the mind. What is more, because of lateral deformations and the movement of the eyes, the image constructed using geometric procedures cannot be an adequate reproduction of the visual image. This fact was known, by the way, in antiquity. The proof can be seen in the slight curves on the columns of Greek temples, as well as in the intentional deformations in the paintings found at Pompeii. Painters of the Renaissance also made use of the phenomenon called perceptive (8) or subjective (9) perspective.

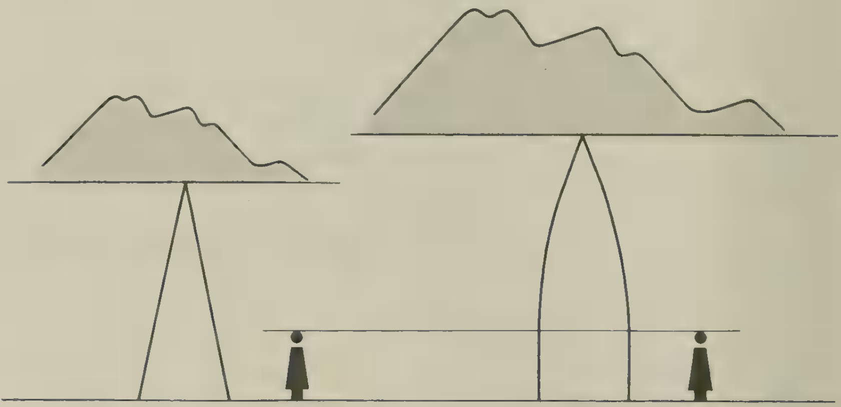

Fig. 32

The drawing which represents a straight road and a mountain at the horizon shows the difference between the two

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7. Michelis, p. 201. We will develop the arguments of this conception at the end of the next chapter.

8. Boris V. Raushenbah, *Prostranstvennye postroenia v drevnerusskoy zipopisi (Spatial Structures in Ancient Russian Painting)*, Nauka, Moscow, 1975, pp. 21-6 0.

9. Panovsky, pp. 43ff.

perspectives: in linear perspective, everything is subordinated to the principle according to which straight parallels lines meet at the vanishing-point on the horizon. (figure 32a) This corresponds to a photographic image. The image is built on geometric principles and is abstract, but it has the advantage of unity and clarity. In perceptive perspective, other factors come into play: the foreground shows the road as having nearly parallel lines due to its closeness to the spectator along with the fact that it is seen with two eyes. Then by a slight curve, the road approaches linear perspective. (figure 32b) What is evident here is that the closer an object is to the spectator, the less its lines are governed by linear perspective; the more an object recedes into the distance, the more it conforms to linear perspective.

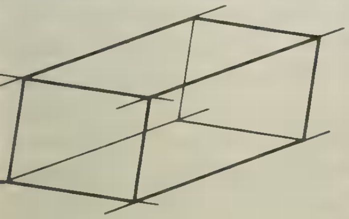
Fig. 33

Yet another phenomenon is visible in the mountain on the horizon: it appears larger than in linear perspective. We observe the same effect when we compare a countryside seen with the naked eye and its photograph. On the picture, the mountain seems to be too small; this is due to the fact that the brain transforms optical impressions. In this process, our minds are influenced by our knowledge of the object, its distance from the observer, the distance between the object and other objects, and the general comparison with other elements in the visual field. (10)

The characteristic of this perspective is that space is still a "quantum continuum," but that its continuity does not always have the same density. It is halfway between linear continuity and the broken space of other perspectives which we will now study.

Isometric Perspective

This type of perspective represents the object without the deformations of linear perspective, that is, the lines of the object remain parallel despite a certain illusion of space. This effect is only possible, however, if the object is very close to the spectator. The parallel lines create the impression that the object has no relation to the surrounding space. The object is itself space, isolated space, with its own structures and has no relation with another element in a whole. (figure 33) Thus the isometric perspective does not indicate a focal point as does linear perspective which opens itself to the spectator so he can enter into its depth. The isometric object is neutral; it is a simple presence or the statement of a truth, outside of

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10. Our memory of an object is more complete than the data which physical vision presented to the mind. The real dimensions, colors, contact, etc. transform optical impressions. For example, according to the "law of the stability of dimensions," the spectator always sees things larger than they really are.

space and time. (11) We often find this perspective in iconography.

This isometric perspective conveys another interesting teaching: when the parallel lines of an object are too long, the observer has the impression that the lines spread apart from one another and that the dimensions of the more distant parts get bigger. The object seems to expand. On the other hand, if we check the measurements with a compass, we see that they are the same for all sections of the object, those close as well as those farther away. This shows that under the influence of images in linear perspective, the modern observer cannot free himself from that structure; we see everything from that point of view. A child, however, who has not yet been educated to see everything according to linear perspective, can represent objects not as he sees them, but as he knows them. (12) This was also the case for painters in the Middle Ages. According to time-honored tradition, they were educated to see space according to structures of a *non-linear perspective.*

Inversed Perspective.

We have already noted that there exists no philosophical or historical source to explain why, after the illusionist art of antiquity, Byzantium as well as Western Europe abruptly began to represent the world by reversing the spatial focus. This fact expresses a profound change in the cultural life of the period. And since art forms have a semantic character, we should be able to legitimately propose conclusions about the associated philosophical and theological ideas, but first we will have to make an objective analysis of the phenomena.

Let us first of all consider what is called inversed perspective. As the name indicates, we are dealing with a perspective whose structures are reversed in relation to linear perspective. This means that the technical conception of inversed perspective is historically later than that of linear perspective. In fact, scientific research in this area of iconology has only been carried out since the beginning of the 20th century.(13) Up until this time, the icon, being a liturgical image, remained intimately tied to Orthodox religious life.

11. This is why this perspective is used today in technical drawings which must represent objects in the most faithful way possible and provide information about them in the most exact way possible. Photography, even with a special camera lens, deforms reality.

12. We also notice this tendency in modern painting.

13. The expression "inverse perspective" was formulated by Oskar Wulff, "Die umgehehrte Perspektive und die Niedersicht," *Kunstgeschichtliche Monographien* in honor of Auguste Schmarsow, K.W. Hiesermann, Leipzig, 1907. This work is a defense of representations of Byzantine space.

The principle of inversed perspective is simple. The lines of this perspective do not meet at a vanishing-point situated behind the canvas but at a point in front of the canvas. (figure 34) In fact, we cannot really speak of a system whose vanishing-point is found in the observer because in icons, there is rarely only one convergence point, and often each represented object has its own perspective. In the same way, we do not find a scale of width which, in linear perspective, has the function of representing the lateral extension of space. The people and objects are often not placed in a 'proper' order according to distance and dimension but simply set side by side according to a principle of composition and according to the meaning which the objects have in the painted scene. There is, thus, no depth inside the representation; space is reduced, and it extends out toward the spectator. In this way, the focus is reversed; the lines come out from the inside of the image and move toward the spectator.

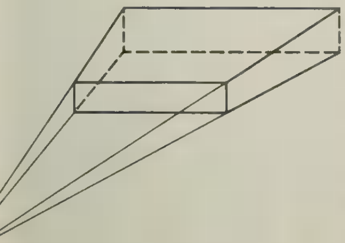

Fig. 34

In this sense, the icon is the opposite of a Renaissance painting; it is not a window through which the mind must go to have access to the world represented. It is rather a place where a presence is encountered. In the icon, the represented world shines out toward the person who opens himself to receive it. In inversed perspective, space itself becomes active instead of the observer who in fact is acted on.

Analysis Of Various Icons

Let us now look at some icons to see how inversed perspective was actually put to work. The various schools did not use it with the same rigor even though it was present everywhere. In the beginnings of Christian art and up to the iconoclastic period, we see only the simplest forms of inversed perspective, but we never see spatial depth. It was only later during the classical period of Byzantine art, at the time of the second Palaeologue renaissance, that we see the great richness of possibilities associated with inversed perspective. It was probably in the art of Novgorod that this perspective reached its peak. We have chosen four icons which are characteristic of their periods in order to understand how natural space can be expressed by inversed perspective. In the descriptions which follow, we have used the terms "left" and "right" in relation to the spectator who has to put himself in the place of the persons represented so that the real movement of the icon takes place from right to left.

The Annunciation, 14th Century, Ochrid (Figure 35)

The space of this icon is especially marked by slanting lines, below the two pedestals and above the baldachin of the

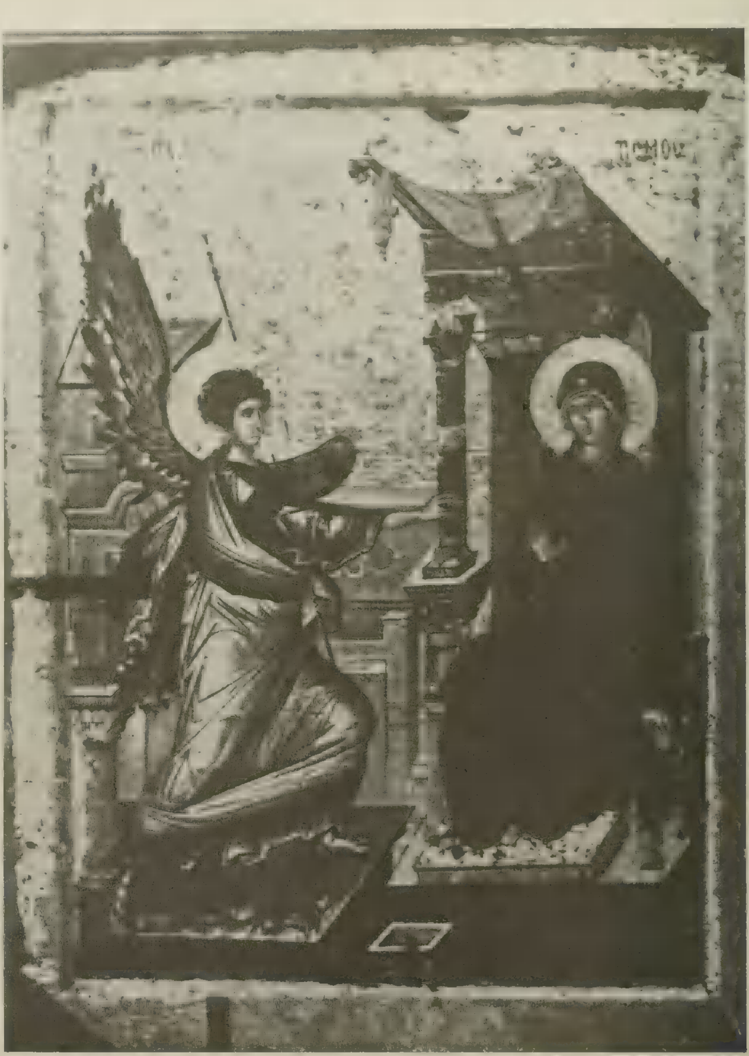

Fig. 35

Virgin's throne. The foreground is indicated by the two pedestals which cause the flooring to rise without giving the impression of depth because they are drawn in isometric perspective. This foreground is limited by the constructions whose forms are seen from above and represented in planimetry or slightly in inversed perspective. The pedestal of the column rises to the height of the Virgin's hand and is exactly on the horizontal axis of the image. The lines of the baldachin move in the opposite direction; its surfaces are drawn in isometry. Behind the angel's wing, we look down on the roof of a building drawn in inversed perspective. The space of the image stops behind this building and blends into the golden background, or absolute light beyond all earthly dimensions. The main characteristic of this icon then is to give the impression that it only has a foreground.

Intercession of the Virgin, 15th Century, Novgorod (Figure 36).

Despite a slight sense of depth, we have the impression that this complicated scene moves out toward the spectator. The lower half of the icon is filled by a throng of people placed side by side with equal-sized heads, isocephaly, and whose feet touch the lower edge of the icon. Rising up behind them, we see other saints. Their heads are larger than those of the people in the foreground. This phenomenon is also a form of inversed perspective which is not limited to plane surfaces and cubes. Thus the people in the background seem to be on the same plane as those in front.

The architectural forms of the upper half illustrate many solutions to the problem of perspective. The temple with columns on the left, the tower, and the portico above the bishop are seen from above; the roofs are drawn in isometric perspective. The side is set forward somewhat and is in inversed perspective. The representation of the church in the center of the icon is especially interesting; it dominates the whole composition. The Virgin floats in the air in front of and not under the baldachin which is drawn without depth and with only three columns. This structuring avoids giving the impression of depth. The Virgin is in front of the church's facade with its other sides bent forward. In the same way , we can see them both at the same time. Like the roof, they are represented in isometry. The roof allows us to clearly grasp the problem that this form of representation poses: when the sides are bent forward, the roof must be cut in two along the pinnacle ridge. The cupola emerges from this separation and is also drawn without depth. The artist has gone even farther in that at the right of the church, he has folded the apse into the plane when in fact it ought not even to be visible since it would normally be on the opposite end. On the right of the church, we see a strange construction which reminds us of the throne in the Ochrid Annunciation: is it a gallery from which the Virgin's veil is stretched out as a symbol of her protection? It is probably some element belonging to the interior of a building because the Virgin appeared, as is told in the icon, inside the Church of Blachernae and not outside in front of it. By refusing "box-space," that is any kind of depth, Byzantine art had to depict events that took place inside a building as though they took place outside. In order to indicate that the action was taking place inside a building, a red veil was suspended from the tops of various structures.

In the lower center, we need to comment on the form of

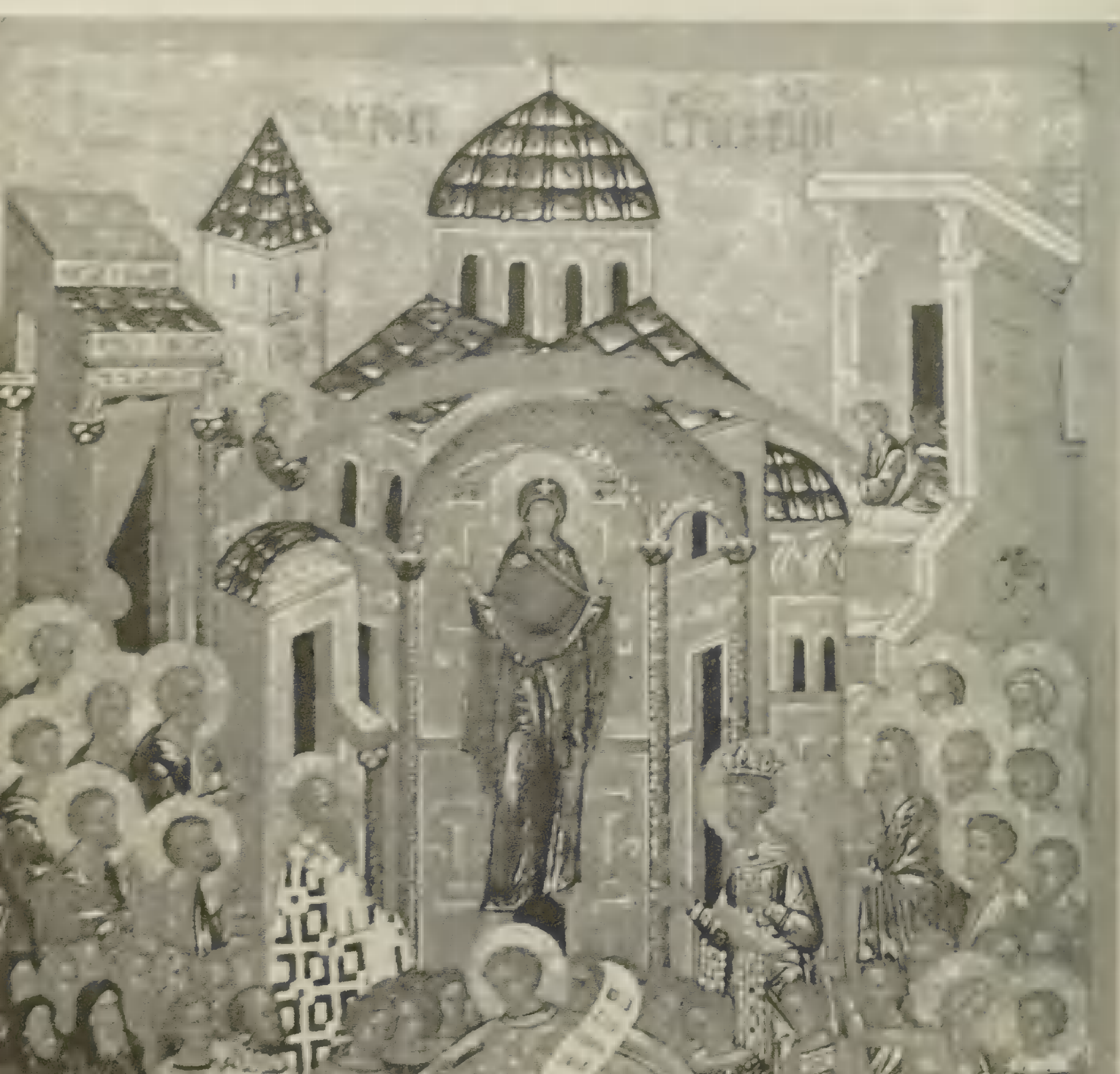

Fig. 36

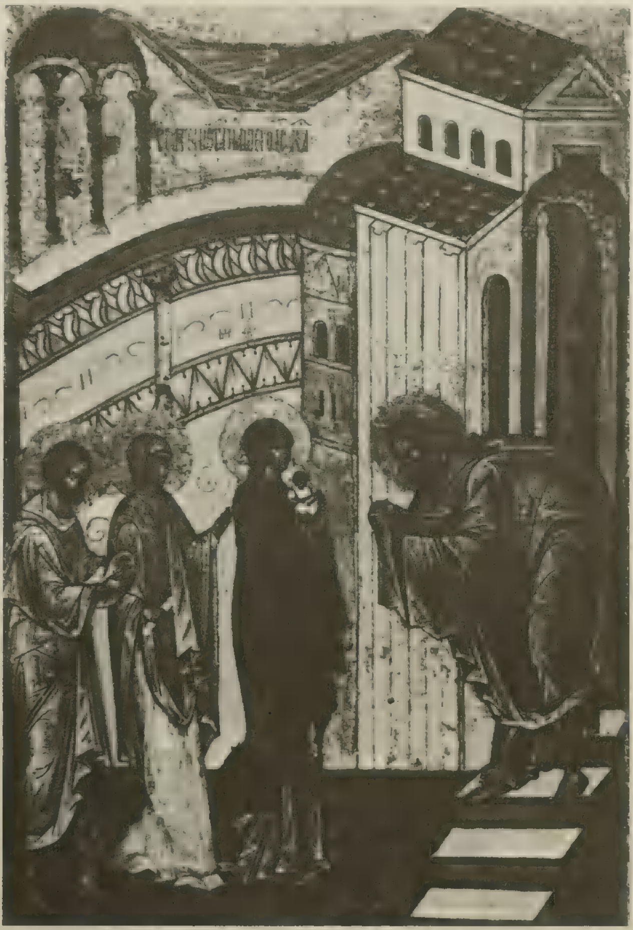

Fig. 37

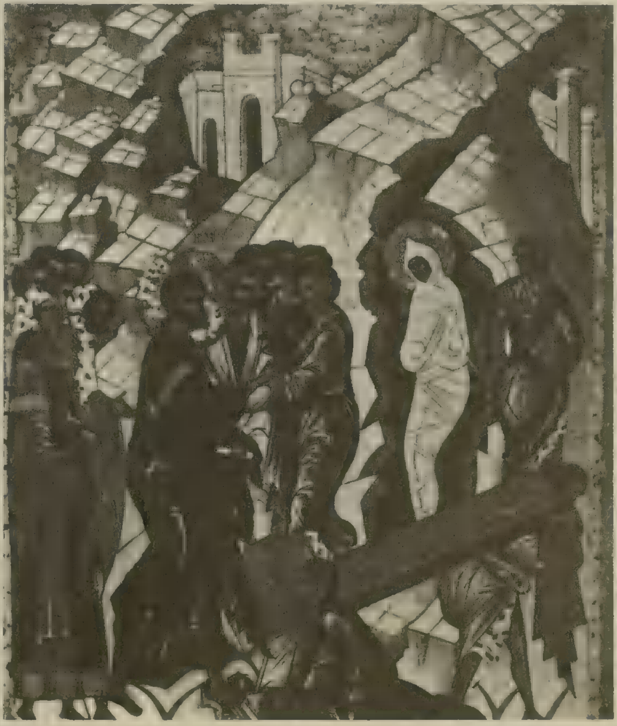

Fig. 38

the throne on which Romanos the chanter is standing. We see a form of inversed perspective in the curved back; actually the back is formed by two different curved surfaces, one on the right and the other on the left. Inversed proportion is also emphasized by the fact that the back section is turned sharply toward the front. The two steps are drawn in slightly inversed perspective.

The Presentation in the Temple, 15th Century, Novgorod (Figure 37).

The foreground is formed by a relatively wide ground on which three persons move toward Simeon: the Virgin, the prophetesse Anna, and St. Joseph, from right to left. This ground or flooring seems to rise up toward the spectator, an impression accentuated by the rhythm of the steps drawn in slightly inversed perspective; the lowest and closest step is smaller than the others. The background with its vertical lines is quite striking. The canopy, the facade, and the sides of the Temple are drawn in isometric perspective; the apse here too is brought into the plane. The curved wall dominates the background. In order to close off the background at the left and to avoid a heightened sense of depth, since the wall slides in behind the apse, the painter bent it forward. The wall, therefore, has the same height as the entrance of the Temple. At the top of the wall, we have another baldachin, drawn flat; it holds up the veil that indicates that the scene is taking place indoors. (14) The curved wall shows that the architectural forms are not just used for showing space but are equally constituent elements of the composition itself. This wall could not be straight because it would then produce horizontal lines that would run into the vertical ones of the Temple at the right; such a straight wall would destroy the unity of the physical setting, à unity created by the curve.

The Resurrection of Lazarus, End of the 15th Century, Novgorod, (Figure 38)

In this icon, the density of the composition and the force of the movement predominate. Everything happens in the foreground. At the left, the group of Pharisees with Christ and the group of disciples are drawn very closely together. Even the movement of their bodies seems to take place in a

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14. This wall is always found on the icons of the Doubting Thomas.

two-dimensional world. At the Lord's feet, Mary and Martha have their place; they are touching the front edge of the scene as is the man at the right who is carrying the stone. By this juxtaposition of persons we have a nearly impossible positioning: the stone is practically on top of the two women. The perspective of the stone itself is not clear since a part of it is concealed. A distinct form would probably have upset the composition even more. (15) Very near to the foreground, we see Lazarus still in his tomb. The dominant element of this scene is the movement of the rocks. They contrast sharply with the tranquility of the representation. In their variations, the lines favor the diagonal. The mass of stone rises very slightly turning the summits toward the spectator in an S-curve. We have the impression that they thus move right into the foreground, as do the people. The rocks' strange forms are also a form of inversed proportion. The buildings in the open spaces only accentuate the rocks' movement toward the foreground.

Even though these observations need to be completed by other analyses which would concentrate on the icons painted by the masters, the salient characteristics of inversed proportion stand out clearly:

1. In Byzantine paintings and especially in icons, there is very little spatial depth. The space is often limited to the foreground and closed off toward the background by a secondary scene containing buildings or landscape. There is no three-dimensional illusion, depth, or bodies.
2. The event represented takes place in the foreground. By enlarging the proportions of the people in the background, they seem to belong to the foreground.
3. Architectural elements and objects, seats, etc., are drawn either in isometry or inversed perspective. (16) Their sides are thus bent forward and even the parts normally invisible are represented. In order to avoid the representation of the interior of a building which would necessarily require depth, the scenes always take place outside of a building. The landscape of rocks are shown with the same principle of forward movement. In all constructions, the vertical is rigorously preserved.
4. The whole of these systems of representation allows us to say that the line of movement is from the interior of the icon outward toward the spectator.
5. Perspective is not an isolated aspect of a work of art, but

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15. This procedure is often used to harmonize the whole. Thus in the icon of the Trinity, Rublev hides the real persepctive of the table and the chairs.

16. Sometimes in certain details, we do find linear perspective, but it only plays a subordinate role.

is subordinated to the composition and especially to the very idea of the work.

The preceding analysis has intentionally been limited to formal elements of inversed perspective. We must now move on to look at the theories that interpret inversed perspective so as to arrive at its theological meaning.

CHAPTER 9

The Theories of Inversed Perspective

Introduction

The complexity of inversed perspective in itself shows that we cannot consider Byzantine iconography to be a primitive style which is incapable of representing space as we perceive it. We must assume, rather, that this style of artistic expression was chosen and developed because it was the best way to express reality as the Middle Ages conceived of it and wanted to translate it visually.

In the last few decades, iconographic research has tried to explain the principles of inversed perspective on the basis of certain scientific data. As a result, two tendencies have developed: 1) in the USSR, research is based on optical and geometric theories, and 2) in the West, research tends to see inversed perspective as an expression of cultural data. Before entering upon an explanation of these two interpretations, it is necessary to emphasize that we are dealing with different theories which have little in common except certain rare principles. Research is still far from a synthetic solution.

The Scientific Aspects of Perspective

One of the first theories worthy of the name concerns double perception and was put forward by A. V. Babushinski. (1) He explains inversed perspective by the fact that man sees with two eyes. Each eye sees an object according to the laws of linear perspective. Combining the two perceptions creates an image on two sides. Despite his interesting observations, Babushinski's conception appears to have a limited applica-

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1. Anatoly V. Babushinski, "Linejnaia perspektiva v iskusstve i zritel'nom vospriatii real'novo prostranstva" ("Linear Perspective in Art and in the Visual Perception of Real Space"), *Iskusstvo*, t. I, no. 1, 1923, Moscow, pp. 213-16

tion because it only works when we are dealing with a short distance, less than 30 cm (one foot), and with objects of reduced dimensions, that is, which do not go beyond the distance of 30 cm from the eyes. Thus this explanation seems more ingenious than probable.

L. F. Zhegine: 'Dynamic' Space (2)

Zhegine's theory is based on the fact that human vision is monocular, that is, people see the world according to the laws of linear perspective. By moving from place to place, we see various aspects of an object which are mentally combined into a single image thus containing features of different positions. In figure 39, movement is expressed by the curved lines C1-A and C2-B.

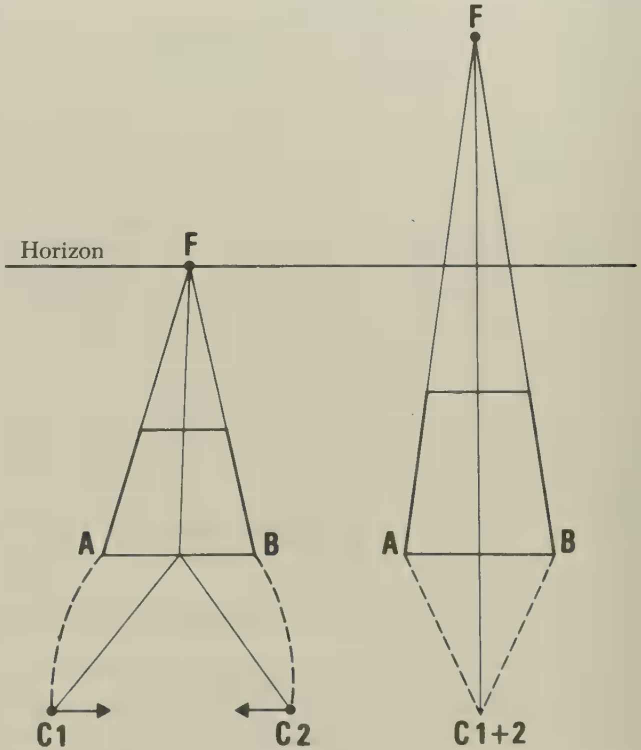

Fig. 39

According to this process, vertical and horizontal lines remain parallel and only the lines leading to the vanishing point are changed by the displacement. Thus the vanishing point is raised above the horizon while the side facing the

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2. Lev F. Zhegine, *Iazyk zhivopis'nova proizvedenia (The Language of the Pictoral Work)*, Iskusstvo, Moscow, 1970.

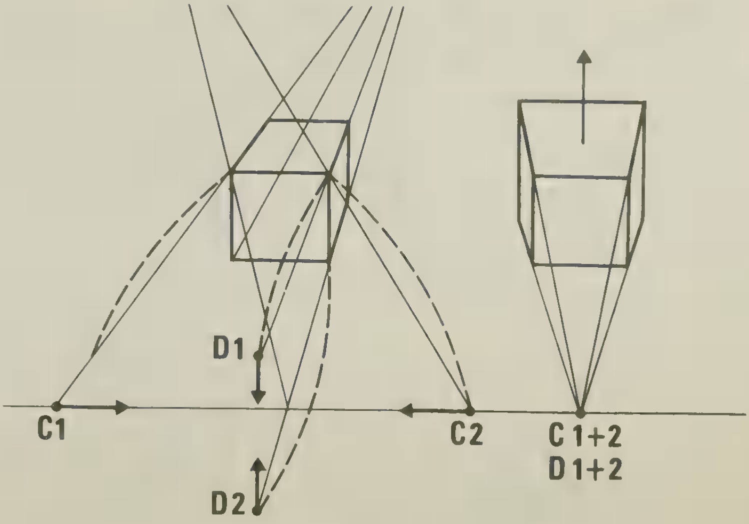


Fig. 40

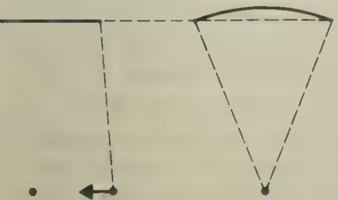


Fig. 41a

spectator, AB, remains unchanged.

This explanation works for a two-dimensional surface. When we introduce volume, however, we must add the third dimension which itself has two points of view, D1-D2, and these unite with C1 and C2. (figure 40) By the movement, the surface rises, the edges in the back lengthen, and the object seems generally to advance toward the spectator. At the same time then, the spectator sees the object from both sides and from on top.

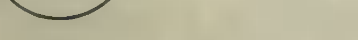


Fig. 41b

This principle of combining the two points of view is also applicable to other geometric forms and produces the deformations which we notice on icons. A straight line thus forms a slight curve (figure 41a), a nearly flat, concaved curve becomes even more concave (figure 41b), and a convex curve is flattened out approaching a straight line. (figure 41c).

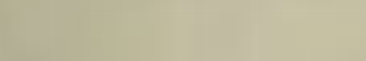
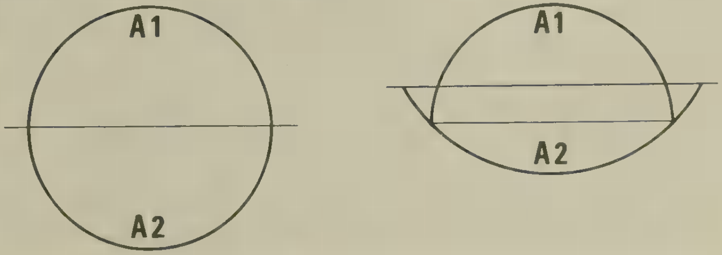


Fig. 41 c

In a circle (figure 41d), these two effects happen at the same time. The upper part of the circle is seen as a convex curve and the lower part as a concave curve. (A1 and A2) By deepening the curve of the upper half of the curve and by flattening the lower half, the circle is thus broken into two parts.

Fig. 41d



Among the numerous examples given by the author, we will cite only certain ones which are explained very well by these principles. We can observe this phenomenon in the drawings of sacred vessels on icons (figure 42): the curve of the base of the chalice is flattened out while the upper edge of the cup is raised and sits on its lower edge which is straightened out somewhat. We thus have the impression that the chalice is drawn in pure profile. In the same way, the strange form of the thrones can be explained by these same principles (figure 43); let us take the fresco of the master Dionysius in the Therapont Monastery. The back of the throne is seen from an oblique angle, but in reality, it has an oval form. It acquires its odd shape by being submitted to the two operations mentioned in connection with a circle and which combine the two points of view. By the combination of A1 and A2, this oval is broken and the right side seems to recede backward.

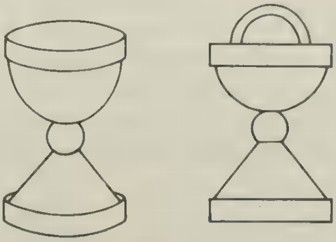


Fig. 42

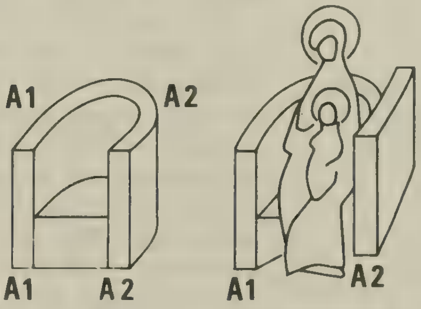


Fig. 43

We can also see that the movement of the two points of view occurs in two dimensions, height and width. A square is thus transformed into a limited form by four curved lines. (figure 44) The back of the throne is in reality rectangular but is drawn with curved lines. This form is found in Novgorodian icons and also in Italian art of the 13th century.

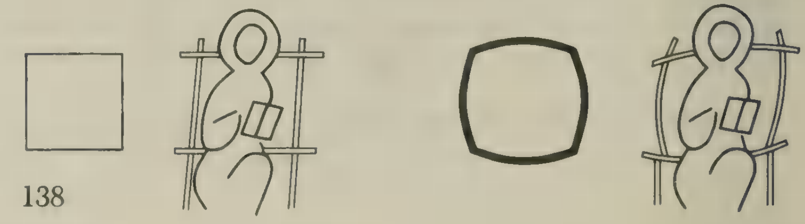


Fig. 44

Another interesting example is furnished by the shape of altars as shown in icons. The top of the altar table is rectangular. (figure 45) By combining the two points of view, the parallel lines directly in front of the spectator are changed into curves. The tension even produces a split in the back edge of the table. The chalice which is sitting on the intersection of the rectangle's diagonals is pushed forward because in the new form, the diagonals and their intersection are also pushed forward. On some icons, the sacred vessels are even advanced to the very edge of the altar table.

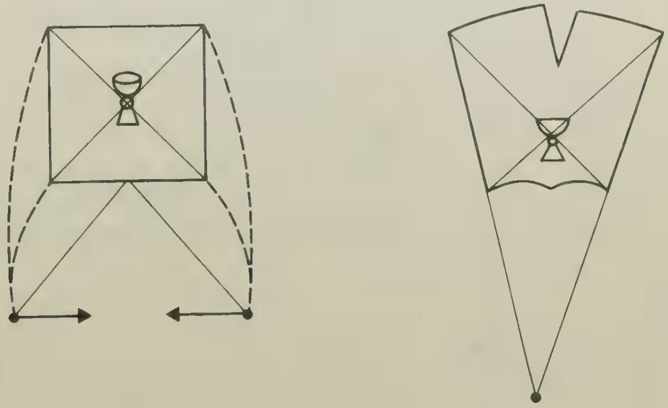


Fig. 45

These examples also show how space is conceived in the system of inversed perspective. Space is no longer reduced to a flat, two-dimensional surface; it has a depth, but in the foreground, it is very slight. The background is curved forward as in a sphere (figure 46), and this is fundamental for the whole of the icon. The spherical space moves out toward the spectator and shines its light on him like a headlight. This spherical space represents a microcosm where each detail has its place, its own proper existence. The spherical space does not subordinate different elements to one unique principle as does the linear perspective of the Renaissance; it is rather a receptacle, a space which surrounds and contains the objects. The spherical space does not need a frame either as does a painting which is conceived to be an open window onto the represented world. In an icon, space is dynamic; it often leaps up from the painted surface and spills over its edges. We can see this effect in the icons of St. George on his horse.

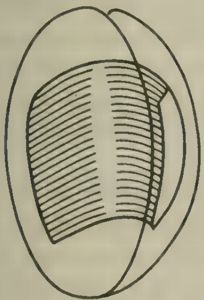


Fig. 46

This icon's frame, however, has the function of giving the whole image a great stability. By entering into the tension of the spherical surface, the details are like the stone in a vaulted arch. They thus receive a new materiality by being inserted into the containing shell of the sphere. Conceived as projections onto a plane, the details are structured by an energetic curved space and given life by sparkling touches of

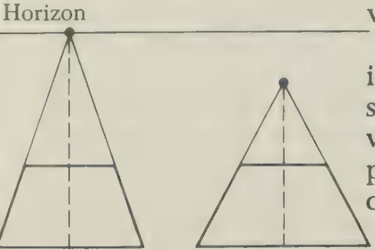


Fig. 47

white as well as a spectrum of colors.

Even so, especially in the forms in the foreground of the icon and at the edges, we can see the opposite phenomenon: a strongly convergent perspective. In linear perspective, the vanishing point is found on the horizon line, but here this point is found below the horizon and this produces a strong convergence of the lines. (figure 47)

In such a perspective, the visual lines move toward the horizon. As in the preceding case, the lines are represented as curves because they are dynamic; they are then cut off in front of the object represented and aim at the opposite sides: point of view A aims at D, and point B aims at C. By unifying the two points of view in one, the object's center moves forward and thus produces a convex form. (figure 48).

The effect of this movement is the same as for inversed perspective: the reduction of space. This phenomenon is very apparent in the drawings of porticos, porches, or building entrances. In the same way, the platforms on which thrones stand show this same type of perspective. (figure 49).

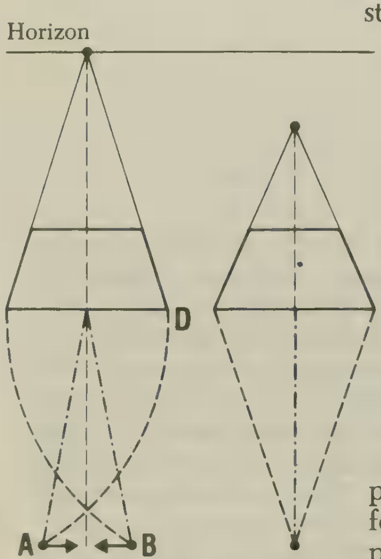


Fig. 48

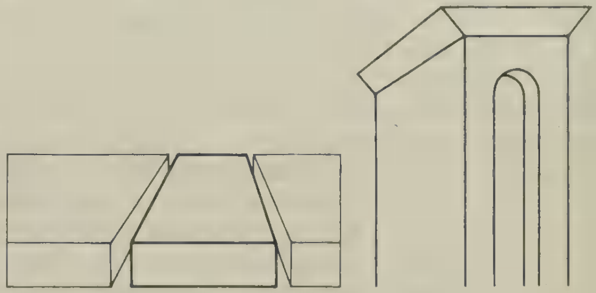


Fig. 49

We must, therefore, not see these forms according to linear perspective. In convergent perspective, the vanishing point is found below the horizon; it is the mirror image of inversed perspective and completes it.

This mirror effect was used by Zhegine to explain the forms of iconic mountains: slabs of stone, seemingly mounted on towers and separated from each other by deep crevasses. Zhegine's theory is rather complicated, but leaving aside the geometric details, we can distinguish three optical operations: 1) straightening of the visual line, 2) movement in a dynamic space, 3) mirror effect.

First of all, the mass of rocks is divided into sections by the straightening of the "curved" visual line as happened for inversed perspective. By this straightening, the separated part is turned slightly in the same direction but does not modify the angle 'alpha' and is extended toward the background. (figure 50)

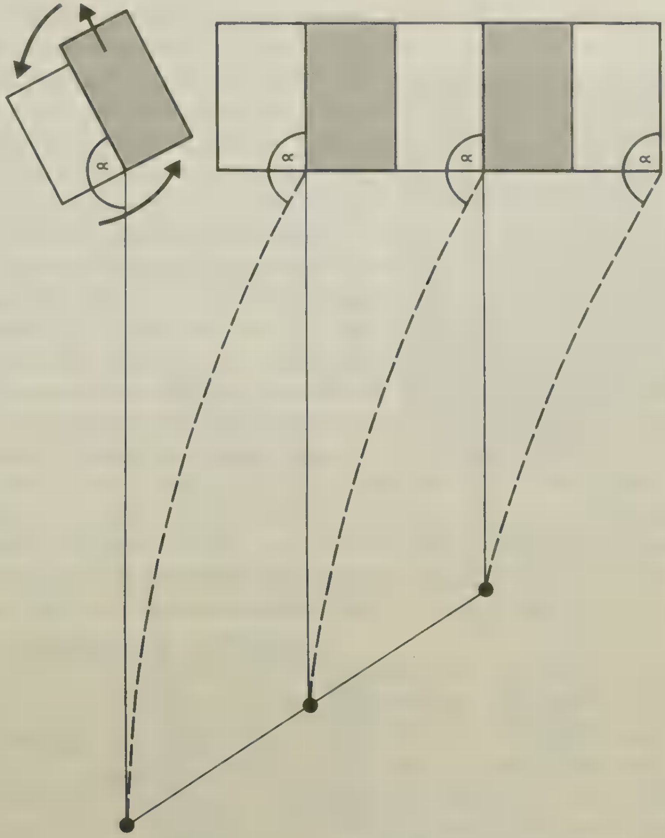


Fig. 50

The movement takes place in three dimensions, that is, in depth also. The surface of the rock bends backwards turning away from the spectator. In order to turn the movement toward the front (180 degrees), toward the foreground, the mirror effect comes into play and produces the inverted image of the surface. (figure 51).

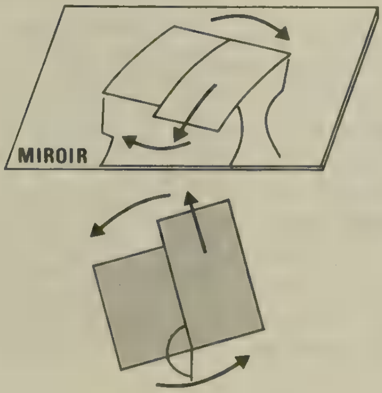


Fig. 51

Thus the movement of the rocks often forms an S-curve. In certain icons, this curve is very pronounced as in the

Beheading of St. John the Baptist, (15th century), Novgorod. (plate 23) Because of the S-curve, the lower foreground of this icon bulges out in the front; the middle section or the background is concave; and in the upper part, the tops of the rocks come back into the foreground in a forward movement. On this setting, the figures appear flat and seem to float in front of the foreground. (figure 52).

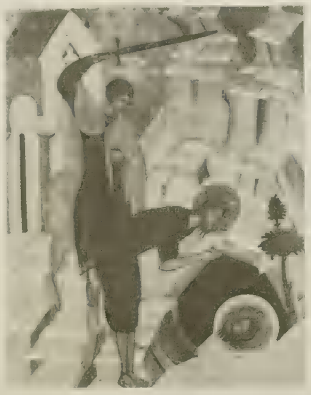


Fig. 52
The Beheading of St. John the Baptist.

These few principles and examples allow us to understand the essentials of this theory. Thanks to the principle of combining the points of view, Zhegine has succeeded in explaining numerous details of inversed perspective. As for other elements, the system becomes too complicated because he wants to reduce everything to the optical aspect of a phenomenon. In attempting to do this, however, other important elements, which surely play an important role, must be neglected.

B.V. Raushenbah:
the Component Elements of Artistic Creation (3)

According to Raushenbah, inversed perspective in Byzantine painting is not due to one single factor but rather to several elements which belong to very different areas, such as optics and artistic procedures. By simplifying, we can summarize his arguments, which are even based on non-Euclidean geometry, in the following way.

The Byzantine painter did not work on the basis of an observation of nature but represented objects as he knew them. His main concern was to bring out the essence of things. The fundamental system for such representations is isometric perspective. (See the preceding chapter, The Various Systems) In this system, the sides of a cube remain parallel because they are not dependent on a vanishing point as in linear perspective, but they are deformed by three optical phenomena. First of all, the principle of form constancy produces the effect that an inclined surface is perceived as being larger than its real impression on the retina. Thus the surface of a table rises up toward the spectator. In order to maintain its position on the floor, the artist must lengthen the back legs.

A second influence is exercised by the effect of binocular vision, the fact that we see with two eyes: the closest objects are seen in their real dimensions, and those farthest away undergo deformations. In fact, many forms found in the foreground are drawn according to the isometric system.

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3. B.V. Raushenbah, *Prostransivennye postroenia v drevnerusskoy zhipopisi (The Structures of Space in the Painting of Ancient Russia)*, Nauka, Moscow, 1975.

A third optical factor is the mobility of the point of view. In Byzantine painting, there is, in fact, never one single point of view as in linear perspective. Renaissance painters were very quick to notice, as we have already mentioned, that one single vanishing point in a painting produced a false image of reality. Very often, each building, each piece of furniture has its own point of view. Each object thus affirms its proper existence independently of the whole. Raushenbah imagined that the different points of view were the result of the movement of a single one, that the spectator had to move around in order to see each detail of the composition from the proper angle.

Two artistic factors are added to these optical elements. The painter wanted to inform the spectator of certain aspects of the object which were not visible. For example, he showed the rooftops of buildings which were in reality invisible to the spectator since he was too low. Another example is the surface of a table or the pages of a book which are turned toward the spectator so he can more easily see these objects or the text. This procedure once again accentuates the constancy of forms.

Finally, the painter finds himself facing the difficulty of unifying these elements in a composition; the difficulty is increased all the more because he does not have the unifying principle of linear perspective, the spatial depth with its vanishing point. The painter must, therefore, use abstract outlines and geometric structures. We can, thus, see that the forms of inversed perspective are accentuated toward the periphery of the composition and that the whole is subordinated to the person or principle scene.

In order to avoid deformations which do too much violence to natural forms, the painter hid them partially, for example under garments. On Rublev's icon of the Trinity, the chairs are for the most part covered by the garments of the angels.

Raushenbah's theory was received in the USSR in 1975 with great interest. Its value derives from taking optical factors into consideration. Raushenbah consecrated an important part of his book to the scientific demonstration of the theory using differential equations; he was, thus, able to express the non-Euclidean structures of inversed perspective. We are permitted to ask, however, if all these factors taken together really give rise to the unity of forms that we find in Novgorodian icons, for example. The fundamental question is not "What was the geometrical structure of the forms used in icons?" but rather "What was the world vision that produced them?"

The Cultural Aspects of Perspective

In the West, people began to be interested in the question of perspective near the end of the 19th century when the theoretical writings of the Renaissance were discovered and published. Wulff and Strygowsky dealt with this problem as it touched Byzantine art, but their works were only a beginning and lacked depth. It was not until the early twenties that there was a serious study of the question in Erwin Panovsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form.* (4).

Starting from Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, Panovsky analysed perspective in order to interpret it as the expression of the worldview held by a given age.

The conclusion of Panovsky's study consists in affirming that historical evolution has advanced through different stages up to the consecrated idea of the Renaissance: central or linear perspective. We cannot deny the historical facts, but it is indirectly suggested that this evolution represents a real progress toward perfection and is an artistic progress as well. This opinion is difficult to justify and obviously provoked the reaction of the historians of Byzantine art, especially P. A. Michelis in his work *The Aesthetics of Byzantine Art.* (5)

P. A. Michelis: the Feeling of Space

Michelis' aesthetic analysis rests on two categories which are used throughout his expose to explain the essence of Byzantine art: the beautiful and the sublime.

The beautiful naturally belongs to an artistic current that seeks to imitate nature, strives for objectivity, governs the ordering of painting procedures, and moves toward a scientific conception of perspective.

The other category is the sublime, that is transcendent beauty which results from contemplation. Here everything moves toward the infinite, feelings spill over, and the means of representation become non-rational.

As for the representation of space according to Michelis, two things must be distinguished: 1) sensible, empirical space and 2) the sensation or feeling of space.

The first of these is a physiologically invariable experience which finds its expression in theoretical space determined by three coordinates: the width, height , and depth of Euclidean geometry. These three dimensions constitute an unchanging framework in which the artist constructs the world of his vi-

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4. "Die Perspecktive als symbolishe Form", a conference given between 1921 and 1925 and edited in Vortraege der Bibliothek Warburg, B.G. Teubner, Berlin-Leipzig, 1927, pp. 258-330

5. P.A. Michelis, *Esthétique de l'art byzantine*, Flammarion, Paris, 1959

sion.

The sensation of space is completely different; it is subjective and variable. By its very nature, it belongs to the category of the sublime. Thus, by harmony and order, art gives rise to the impression that all contradictions between the finite and the infinite have been abolished. Under the tiny cupola of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, with its thousands of stars, the "viewer" is plunged into the unfathomable depths and feels drawn toward the mystery of infinity. In the same way, the golden background of Byzantine icons creates a uniform and infinite space, like the sky, which becomes the container of everything.

According to Michelis, even if Byzantine art did not have a rational system of perspective, it had nonetheless an art of seeing and representing. For Byzantine art, depth was not considered to be a value that should be visibly exploited. What was important was the foreground. This slight depth is created by the different dimensions of the objects and the movement of the people. Consequently, the unity of the work is not based on a uniform perspective in which each element is subordinated to the structure of a system, but rather on the meaning that the artist gives to the elements in a scene. And since he does not represent them according to a design based on observation but on the form that he knows, the image becomes true and at the same time expresses the symbolic meaning of the scene.

Michelis refused to admit that the notion of perspective had a place in Byzantine art. He also refused Wulff's notion of inversed perspective. "In summary, perspective belongs to the domain of technique and not to that of art." (6) As such, perspective becomes one of the means of composing an image. It helps to establish an order according to the laws of coordination and subordination assuring the unity of the work.

K. Onasch: the Perspective of Importance and Epic Perspective

K. Onasch only spoke of two forms of perspective in iconography. (7) His conception of perspective is rather close to that of Michelis. In fact, it can be reduced to a simple technical means which is part of the composition; by creating an order between the elements of the image, perspective gives rise to a certain space.

The simple juxtaposition of several saints on an icon

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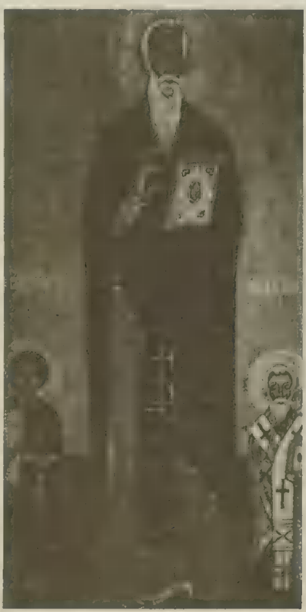
6. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
7. *Die Ikonenmalerei*, Kochler und Amelang, Leipzig, 1965.

already creates a space. Now on some icons, the central person has more important dimensions; this he called the perspective of importance. This is especially true of Christ surrounded by saints but also of a saint like John Climacus as painted by the Novgorodian School, (14th century). (plate 24) The monumental proportions of this saint are accentuated even more by the dark brown tint of his monastic habit and by the expressiveness of his face encircled by white hair and a white beard. At his sides, very small, we see the two protector saints of flocks and herds, St. George and St. Blasius. They only come up to the knees of the holy monk. In the East and at Rome, kings and emperors had already been represented with greater dimensions than their entourages in order to better express their royal dignity and make it more visible.



Sts. John of the Ladder, George, and Blasius.

By using this principle of "representation," Byzantine painting accentuated the holiness of the persons represented. Their individual and temporal aspects were thus clothed by the brilliance of eternal values, and the image itself receives a function other than that of a simple drawing.

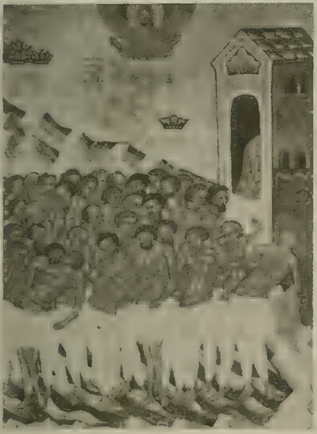
The way that an icon grasps, understands, and draws its subject cannot be based just on physical vision but must be interpreted by thought. In the same way, its optical effect undergoes a change; by enlarging the proportions, the main person seems to move out from the interior of the icon toward the spectator. The focus is thus inversed.

A similar dynamism is also expressed in the representation of groups of men; Egyptian art had already used this technique. The people in the foreground were represented as standing, often on the lower edge of the icon. Behind them, the other persons' bodies disappear and only their heads are seen. Normally, they are larger and seem to be closer; this procedure thus produces an inverted perspective.

This effect also appears on the central section of the iconostasis, the deisis, which has already been analysed in chapter 7. In order to underline the importance of Christ in the center of the row, the saints on the left and on the right bow to him. Even if this gesture of supplication expresses the theological meaning of the composition, that is, the intercession of the heavenly court for the people of God, the curves of their outlines and the gestures of their hands move toward Christ in majesty at the center and thus make him stand out from the whole. This effect is all the more accentuated by the larger volume of the heads. Such an impression would not be produced by a frontal representation of the saints because this would result in a simple lining up of the people with no relation between them. The curves and contours give their unity to the icons of the deisis.

Icons which represent a scene, and especially those of liturgical feasts, are composed according to the principles of epic perspective. They have a narrative character, but the theological meaning is always accented; each person, each detail has its importance. Thus the goal of the image is not to create a space in which the event takes place but rather to open the icon up to the spectator so he can understand its message. In order to obtain this effect, the representation cannot use lines that move toward a vanishing-point because they create depth; rather the image uses lines that make the theological meaning of the scene visible. In this way, the image receives its "perspective" in the original sense of the term: the spectator can contemplate the theological meaning of the image through its "represented elements," and the scene thus becomes transparent.

K. Onasch has illustrated his theory by using the icon of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste; the soldiers are represented just as the well-known story of the early centuries tells it. (plate 22) Condemned to death for their faith, they gathered together on the frozen lake to die. The group, very compact and united by their gestures, is represented in inversed perspective. The icon only shows the bodies of the first row and adds the heads of the martyrs in back. The first main line rises like an axis of symmetry toward the top of the icon where Christ appears in a large halo. A second main line leads toward the guard-house where a soldier who abandons the struggle takes refuge. The third main line starts from the pagan guard who joins the martyrs having been converted by their witness. He looks toward the crowns in the heavens at the upper left. This third line runs from the guard up to the crowns. The whole of the image forms a concave surface and thus opens out toward the spectator who can easily follow the the details of the scene and grasp its meaning.



The 40 Martyrs of Sebaste.

Onasch's theory gives an explanation which corresponds to the theological character of icons as well as to the spatial structures which appear in them. This theory encompasses the principle elements of the other theories: the slight depth of the representation, the movement of forms toward the spectator, and the doctrinal base which determines the whole. It does not sufficiently explain, however, the details of the forms which create the space, especially the architecture, the landscape with its rocks, and other objects. It seems to be a questionable premise to deny a symbolic character to inversed perspective and reduce it to a simple, technical procedure.

Conclusion

Even if they are often contradictory, these theories show the richness of the Byzantine artistic outlook. In addition, they show us the possibility of representing reality by forms based not on the observation of nature but on ideas. By this very fact, such forms bring out truth in their own way and let us see aspects which are not representable by a naturalistic perspective. Even if scientific interpretations quickly reach their limits and cannot answer the question concerning the origin of such forms, they do give us an exact knowledge of the phenomenon and explain many "deformations" which would otherwise remain unexplained. The diversity of theories also shows that research has not yet reached its goal. The important question, however, remains open: Did Byzantine art intend to represent space or only use it as a principle of composition? The researchers seem to be in agreement on certain points though: 1) the image is a representation of ideas and not of nature 2) the subject is represented as if it were on a spherical surface with hardly any depth 3) the details have their own space without being subordinated to a uniform outline 4) the other elements of the painting such as movement, color, and light, have their role in the constitution of the space.

There remains one last question concerning the profound reasons behind Byzantine perspective. Michelis sees in it a reaction against the naturalistic and rationalistic art of antiquity. The category of the sublime has taken the place of the beautiful, and its irrationality has transformed the conception of space. But the change of style and of ideal, is that not also an expression of a change in ideas? We thus have to deal with a new question: What basic law does Byzantine perspective obey?

A. Grabar looked for the reasons in the writings of Plotinus where vision is not conceived as an impression in the soul, like the impression of a seal in wax but rather is grounded in the object itself. The artist looks at the image as if he were himself in the represented object's place so as to draw it in its true dimensions. This thesis though "is far from being accepted by all."

In order to determine the most probable origins of Byzantine perspective, we must turn to the ideas which formed the worldview of that era. Here we cannot help but think about the philosopher and theologian who, under the pseudonym Dionysius the Areopagite, so greatly influenced the Middle Ages. In his system, everything is determined by the shining of the divine light through all creatures. Through the icon the truths of the faith shine out on those who contemplate it. Thus, the movement which in the naturalist painting leads toward the vanishing point reverses itself and moves out toward the person who is looking at the work. This is to say that the ordinary structures and the laws of the representation are overthrown and reversed.

Chapter 10

The World of Colors

Introduction

Numerous studies have thrown light on the principles and structures of the icon and its aesthetic elements. In the field of colors, however, we have only a few essays which do not go to the bottom of the problem; there are also some notes in popularizing books which interpret iconic colors without asking the question of their origin and symbolic meaning.

Iconographers' manuals, historically rather recent, only give indications without explanations for the colors of saints' clothing. Since they reflect a tradition already stabilized for several centuries, it is quite possible that the symbolism of the colors was still conscious in the minds of 16th and 17th century painters, but even if not, it is certain that the colors were part of a semantic system in which their symbolic value was unquestioned. Due to their exposure to the long tradition, the faithful were used to seeing the different saints painted with their own colors; they were thus able to distinguish them on the iconostasis is as well as in festal icons.

Other problems have been added to the difficulties of interpreting the meaning of colors; these come from the artistic creations of different schools and cultures. We do not claim then to set out a theory of color in Byzantine art, nor to work out its symbolism; what follows is but several elements which will help us to better understand the place of color in Byzantine iconography, and this in the light of contemporary research.

Before dealing with the problem of color, we must realize that we are in a domain where many theories and interpretations are possible. In an icon, the role of the graphic element, the actual drawing, is to determine the object, to give it shape, to make it stand out from its context, and to make it understandable. Despite its stylization and emotive aspects, this graphic element speaks first and foremost to our reason. It does not mean something, but it is something. Color, on the other hand, is very different. In itself, color does not represent the object but rather gives it a meaning. Color's field of action is thus wider; it speaks to a level of knowledge which is not directly under the control of our conscious mind. We are not able to describe a fundamental color since color is an irreducible quality. In its very nature, color touches our inner sensibilities, and from this fact, it derives its symbolic character because a symbol is not just an abstract sign of a truth but is also a call. We thus have the explanation of an opinion which people have held since the beginning of time: in the fascinating interplay of different colors, we have the sign of another world.

The Sources of Byzantine Symbolism

The present state of historical research does not permit us to speak of a Byzantine color canon. The masterpieces of iconography show, however, that color was of primal importance for the representation of religious subjects and that certain colors were definitely attributed to different persons. It would be a violation of the icon's sacred character to see in colors simply a reflection of the beautiful hues of a sunset or of flowers in the springtime. (1) These experiences no doubt enriched Byzantine artists, but they can hardly be considered the touchstone of the artists' notion of color. Color cannot be understood as simply a decorative element; it was part of an artistic language and attempted to make the transcendent world visible. When every source of interpretation has failed, the symbolic meaning of color must be sought in the major currents that formed Byzantine art.

First of all, let us look at the biblical world which seemed to be hostile to every image. Hebrew culture could only express itself by means of the Holy Scriptures, and even there, we note that the vocabulary dealing with color names is not very extensive. (2) Outside of the four etymological roots indicating white, black, red, and green-yellow, Hebrew and Aramaic used indirect expressions to refer to other shades: for sky-blue, they said "like a sapphire." Such a tendency shows that color played a secondary role in Hebrew culture; in these conditions, it is not very realistic to try to set up a symbolic canon of biblical colors.

Another main source of Byzantine art is found in

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1. Michael Alpatov, *Kraski drevnerusskoi ikonopisi (Colors in the Iconography of Ancient Russia)*, Izobrazitel'noe Iskusstvo, Moscow, 1974.

2. I. Meyerson, *Problemes de la couleur*, S.E.V.P.E.N., Paris, 1957, pp. 339ff .

Hellenistic culture, that is Greece along with many contributions from the East. Greek was the language of the empire in which theologians and philosophers wrote. The literature of antiquity was well known in this Hellenistic world, and on many occasions during its one thousand year history, intellectual life was dominated by it. Byzantine art was thus rooted in the forms of ancient Greek art.

In painting, for example, we do not find a color system; on the other hand, the color vocabulary is of great richness and variety. (3) It is thus curious to note that among all the color names, there is only one that is of Indo-European origin, red. This color has a special place in nearly the whole of humanity. This fact allows us to suppose that the Hellenes received their color vocabulary from a civilization which preceded them on their own territory. What is more, despite their use in architecture and textiles and despite their material value, colors had a symbolic meaning independent of these material factors. For example, purple cloth played an important role in commercial exchanges. Two lines can be set out: 1) white, red, green, and blue express life, purity, peace, and goodness and 2) black, gray, brown, and pale yellow express death, danger, and impurity. At the center, we find the enigmatic color purple, signifying both royalty and death. These two orientations in the world of color, however, do not allow us to speak of a color canon or of a fixed symbolism.

The third component feeding into Byzantine art is Christian thought, and in this area, it is only proper to give a special place to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Here as with inversed perspective and light, we find only a few remarks in his writings concerning the symbolism of colors. These remarks do not permit us to establish any aesthetic principles, but we can see a certain scale of values based on his idea of celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies as found in his writings. It is in describing these hierarchies that Pseudo-Dionysius spoke of colors.

Color belongs to the world of symbols, and in Pseudo-Dionysius' world, symbols differ according to their intrinsic nobility and their representational value. He distinguished three types of symbols: 1) noble ones, that is the sun, the stars, and light; 2) middle ones, that is fire and water; and 3) baser ones, that is perfumed oil and stone. Colors belong to this lower, least noble level. In order to discover the meaning of a symbol, an anagogical exegesis must be used to bring out the intelligible teaching; literally "anagogical" means to lead upward, and it implies that we go beyond material realities in order to get closer to the divine which is beyond all sensible qualities. Thus in each symbol, there is included an element

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 313.

of dissimilarity, and the greater this dissimilarity, the closer the symbol approaches the divine reality.

Each order of the heavenly and earthly hierarchies receives the symbols according to the capacity of its intelligence. Thus the Scriptures can represent God as the sun of righteousness, as a cornerstone, or as a worm. "In fact, the value and the level of every symbol are essentially tied to the value and the level of the intelligence which uses it..." (4) The power and usefulness of a symbol seems to be mobile and ambiguous. As for color, this symbolic theory seems to require that we abandon any effort to set of a color canon based on material data. In effect, one and the same color can have a different symbolic meaning in different levels of the hierarchy.

As we have noted, Pseudo-Dionysius rarely spoke of colors, This was not the subject of his works. What he was interested in was finding an answer to this basic question: Despite his inexpressible essence, how can God communicate Himself to creatures so as to allow them to participate in His divine life? In looking for an answer to this question, Pseudo-Dionysius relegated colors to a secondary role, but he did speak to them twice at the end of his work *The Celestial Hierarchy*. The references come at the point where he is trying to explain why the Divine Word represented the celestial essences in the form of multicolored stones and in animal forms, especially horses of different colors;

> *Again, of the many colored varieties of stones, the white represents that which is luminous, and the red corresponds to fire, yellow to gold, and green to youth and vigor. Corresponding to each figure you will find a mystical interpretation which relates these symbolical images to the things above. (5)*
>
> *The symbolism of horses represents obedience and tractability. The shining white horses denote clear truth and that which is perfectly assimilated to the Divine Light; the dark, that which is hidden and secret; the red, fiery might and energy; the dappled black and white, that power which traverses all and connects the extremes, providentially and with perfecting power uniting the highest to the lowest and the lowest to the highest. (6)*

These two quotations show that the color symbolism is not

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4. Denys l'Aréopagite, *La hiérarchie céleste*, Maurice de Gandillac, tr., *Sources chrétiennes*, 58, Cerf, Paris, 1958, p.XC. *Mystical Theology and the Celestial Hierarchies*, The Editors of the Shrine of Wisdom, trs., The Shrine of Wisdom, Nr. Godalming Surrey, England, 1965.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 66 (English text).

6. *Ibid.*

always the same; the interpretation of colors also differs from those given in the prophecies of Zechariah (1:8 and 2:2-3) and Revelations (6:3-7). What is more, Pseudo-Dionysius did not seem to know that red also symbolized blood.

Despite this lack of harmony in interpreting color symbolism, we can group colors according to their transcendent value, that is according to their capacity to express the properties of the divine essence. It is in this order, then, that we will try to give the symbolic meanings for each major color such as the mind of the medieval iconographer must have conceived them.

Colors and Their Meaning

White

The ancient pagan world had already understood white to be the color consecrated to the gods. Pythagorus ordered his disciples to wear white robes when they sang sacred hymns. The sacrificial victims offered in and around Mount Olympus had to be white, and the altar was white marble. From the earliest antiquity, people were buried in white burial clothes as Homer mentioned on the death of Patroclus, *Iliad*, 18. Pythagorus recommended a burial in white as a blessed anticipation of immortality. Plutarch said that

> *only white is completely pure and unmixed, unstained by any other color. It cannot be imitated. And yet it is more proper and appropriate for those we bury, assuming that the deceased person had become simple, pure and exempt from all mixture and from the body which is nothing else than a spot and a filth that we can erase. In the city of Argos, when they are in mourning, they dress in white robes which have been washed in clear water, as Socrates said. (7)*

These few examples show that antiquity also saw a symbol of divinity in the color white, but it was necessary to receive the Christian revelation, with its visions of light, in order for the color white to acquire a new richness and allow it to express a whole new mystery related to light.

For us also white is certainly the color which directly represents the divine world. By its optical effect, by its total absence of coloration, white is closest to light itself. (8) Its ra-

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7. Frederic Portal, *Les couleurs symboliques dans l'Antiquité, le Moyen Age et les temps modernes*, Treutel and Wurtz, Paris, 1837, pp. 46-47, note 4, quoting Plutarch, *La demande des choses romaines*, in the translation of Amyot.

8. Pseudo-Dionysius said "...assimilated to the Divine Light" (*tou theirou phôtos suggenes*), p. 66.

diance transmits purity and calm more than any other color; at the same time, it manifests a dynamism which strikes the eye like the rays of the sun. Its action is thus that of light whose essence is to radiate and project itself through space. In [illegible] painting, white dominates an image by its radiance, and it seems to jump out at the spectator with more power than any other color.

In contrast, however, burial clothes are also white; Christ in the grave and Lazarus coming out of his black tomb. The white swaddling clothes of the Christ-Child in the manger are often seen to point to his future burial. Must we explain this fact by a certain realism? According to the dialectic of Pseudo-Dionysius, there is no doubt a negative aspect attached to the color white: the color of divine glory and power, it is also the color of the destruction of the earthly world.

These few quotations from the Scriptures demonstrate the importance and the rich symbolism of the color white, a well established and well developed symbolism.

The psychological effect of white is seen very clearly in the icon of Christ Among the Heavenly Forces (10), Theophane the Greek also used white for clothing but in a different way from Rublev. At the coming of the Son of Man, Christ appears "like lightning which starts in the East and blazes across the sky to the West..." This blazing character of white, Lk. 9:29, also dominates the whole composition of many icons of the Resurrection. The fresco of Kariye Camii in Constantinople (plate 17) is one of the most beautiful examples: Christ descends like lightning to pull the righteous ones of the Old Testament from their tombs. In this fresco icon, the color white attains the height of its brilliance through the power of the movement which detaches it from the dark blue background.

Let us recall once again the painting of "Paternitas" from Novgorod: white is the main color of the composition; the image of God the Father on his throne (11) vividly stands out from the luminous background. Everything is shown in

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9. This is the faithful representation of Matthew's text: "...and his clothes became as white as light." (Mt. 17:2) Mark adds that "his clothes became dazzlingly white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make them." (9:3)

10. The Cathedral of the Annunciation in Moscow.

11. This image and its theological justification are essentially alien to the Patristic and Orthodox tradition. It was condemned by the Great Council of Moscow, 1666-67. For a discussion of this question, see Ouspensky, *Théologie de l'Icône*, chapter 15 "Le Grand Concile de Moscou et l'image de Dieu le Père", pp. 3 45-86, Cerf, Paris, 1980; Francois Boespflug, *Dieu dans l'art*, Cerf, Paris, 1984; and Fr. Stephen Bigham, "*The Image of God the Father in Orthodox Theology and Iconography*, *The Sacred Art Journal*, (Vol. 5, no. 2, 1984), The Saint John of Damascus Association of Orthodox Iconographers, Iconologists and Architects (P.O. Box 1128, Torrance, CA, USA 90505).

shades of white, the clothing, the hair, and even the face radiant with light. (plate 31) In the scene of Christ before Herod, the brilliant robe (lampras) which Herod put on the Lord takes on a prophetic meaning, whatever might have been Herod's intention. In icons of bishops, the vestments of hierarchs of the Byzantine Church keep this double symbolism: the white background with black crosses recalls the Lord's glory and passion.

White is also the color of those who are penetrated by the light of God. The angels seated near the Lord's tomb (Mk. 16:5 and Jn. 20:12) and the angels of the Ascension (Acts 1:20) as well as the elders of the book of Revelations whose robes were washed in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 4:4 and 7:14). White is equally the color of innocence because to those who are converted, God promises that their sins will become as white as snow (Is. 1:10). It is not surprising then that white expresses the joy of great liturgical feasts. In Constantinople, during such solemnities, the emperors always wore white robes.

Blue

Dionysius called this color "the mystery of beings," "mysterious character" (*kyanôn de ontôn to kryphion*). It is the color of transcendence in relation to all that is earthly and sensual. In fact, the radiance of blue is the least sensual and the most spiritual of all the colors. It produces an impression of depth and tranquillity, and it gives the illusion of an unreal world, one without weight. In an icon, blue recedes and remains passive. It is striking that in the Scriptures this dark blue is absent, and yet in the other cultures of the East, such as in Babylon, azure blue was widely used especially in the background of ceramic decorations. In Egypt, lapis lazuli was the emblem of immortality. The high priest of Egypt wore a blue vestment during religious services; in addition, Egyptian soldiers wore blue scarabs as symbols of their loyalty oaths.

The Old Testament knows only one shade of blue: hyacinth blue, in Hebrew, *tekelet* and in Greek, *hyakinthos* or *holoporphyros*. This color brought to mind the sky, God's dwelling place. The cloth material of the Tent of the Covenant was of this shade of blue (Num. 4:6-12 and Ezk. 23: 6 and 27:7ff) as well as the vestments of the high priest who by his functions was called to communicate directly with God.

In iconography, we find dark blue mainly on the cloak of the Pantocrator, *himation*, as well as on the clothing of the Virgin, *chiton*, and of the apostles. The center of the mandorla in the Transfiguration is painted in dark blue, like the mandorla of the icon of Christ in glory who is covered with seraphim. Despite the absence of source material for the symbolism of this color, we can affirm that in its cultural environment, it stood for the mystery of divine life.

Red

Pseudo-Dionysius characterized this color as "incandescence," the quality of red hot metal, and "activity" (*erythrôn de to pyrôdes kai drastérion*) (12), which means that it unites a strong dynamism to the power of its radiance.

Red is the most active of all the colors; it moves out toward the spectator and imposes itself. In certain icons, especially Russian icons of the 14th and 16th centuries, people's clothing appear to stand out from the background of the image. This is due to the fact that the vibrant lustre of the clothing is not diminished either by shadows or by touches of white. Because of its dynamism, close to that of light itself, red can be the color of an icon's background, like gold and white.

By its luminous power, red has played an important role in all cultures. The rich and precise vocabulary associated with it plainly shows this. In Hebrew terminology, we find a series of expressions which are derived from the word for blood, *dâm*. In Hebrew thought, blood is equivalent to life. All loss of blood is a reduction of life and must be compensated for by ritual purification since God alone is master of life; he alone can re-establish the integral nature of life. The different terms for blood-red are used to describe the color of a youth's cheeks, clothes, and shields but also the color of hair, animals, and colored skins. The symbolic meaning of this crimson red appears very often: the holy water sprinkler of various purifications rites and the cloth material in which Saul dressed the daughters of Israel (2 Sam. 1:24), which the perfect wife wears (Prov. 31:22), and which Jerusalem wears to vainly beautify herself (Jer. 4:30). The clothing of the Messiah, who crushes his enemies, is also crimson red (Is.63 :1-4) as well as the cloak that was put on Jesus' shoulders during His passion (Mt. 27:28); this red clothing signifies the life that the Saviour brings to men by the shedding of His blood. Perhaps we find here a key to the meaning of the Pantocrator's red robe since we do not find an explanation of this fact anywhere in the literature after the iconoclastic period. Some of the martyrs' clothes are also red and symbolize the sacrifice of their lives. Equally, the red-purple signatures of Byzantine emperors remind us of the imperial blood. St. Michael the Archangel's red cloak, the completely red seraphim, and the hell-fire of the Last Judgment correspond rather well to the meaning of red fire found in the writings of

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12. Pseudo-Dionysius, p. 66.

Pseudo-Dionysius.

Crimson red can also have a negative meaning. In two passages of Scripture, it clearly symbolizes evil and sin. In Isaiah, sins as red as crimson will become white as snow (Is. 1:18), and in Revelation as well, the great prostitute and the beast that carries her have crimson as their distinctive color (Rev. 17:3-4). It is difficult, however, to discern a logical link with the previously mentioned symbolism. We are no doubt dealing here with an influence from another source. Or perhaps we should see here a certain dialectic, in the sense of Pseudo-Dionysius.

In the Hellenistic world, red also had a religious meaning. First of all, it was associated with soldiers. Plutarch said that the Archon of Plataea normally wore a white garment and that he was forbidden to touch iron, and yet on the day when the famous battle was commemorated during the ceremony for the dead, he appeared dressed in red and carrying a sword. This, however, is not just a symbol of blood. A by-law of the sanctuary of Rhodes, which was consecrated to the sun god, made allusion to another meaning: "To Helios, a white or red young goat." (13)

The two colors seem to be equivalent, and red, therefore, also belongs to the world of light. The polychromy of the pagan temples, that is the fact that many colors were tastefully combined in their decoration, is a testimony to the truth of this statement. In the face of the rich symbolism of the color red in the Christian world, that of ancient Greece is surprisingly poor in its content. It was in Christianity that red received its consecration by the blood of Christ.

Purple

Purple expresses first and foremost the idea of wealth; because the coloring dye was an imported product, it was very costly. The idea of wealth, however, is mixed in with magical and religious elements. Purple is essentially the symbol of power and as such the instrument and sign of consecration. A purple garment is thus both royal and priestly, but it is too close to red not to reflect the feelings associated with soldiers and warfare. Purple thus appears as the color of the highest dignitaries in Homer (*Odyssey* XIX, 225), Herodotus (IX, 22), Ovid (Metamorphoses *II, 23,)* and Suetonius (*Caesar* , 43 and *Nero*, 32). In the Bible also, the kings were clothed in purple: Belshazzar dressed Daniel in purple because he had read the mysterious writing on the wall of the royal palace (Dan. 5:7,16, and 29); Jonathan the high priest and prince of Judah, the evil richman in the parable of poor

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13. Meyerson, pp. 322-24.

Lazarus (Lk. 16:19), and in Revelations, the woman sitting on the beast with seven heads (Rev. 17:4) were all dressed in purple.

In Byzantium, the emperors were able, in a very special way, to profit by this color symbolism which represented power and authority. Those emperors who were born in the purple hall of the imperial palace carried the title "porphyrogenetus." In addition, the production of purple cloth was an imperial monopoly.

In the Greek world, purple acquired a troubling ambiguity: in the play of Aeschylus, Agamemnon retreated when he trampled on the purple rug that belonged to the gods. At Syracuse, whoever took the "great oath" put on the purple coat of the goddess. This meant that he put his trust in the infernal deities. Purple was also the color of the priestess of the Erinyes. All this goes to show that the color purple had an emotional impact that touched on religious feelings. We understand then why Arthemidorus, in his The Key to Dreams, said that "the color purple has a certain affinity with death."

In Orthodox iconography, the color purple seems to have lost the threatening aspect that it had in antiquity. It is rare that it appears in its pure shade; it usually comes close to red and thus becomes more luminous. Its power and its force do not have a human source but are given by God. Thus the color of kings' and princes' clothing is closer to dark red. The chiton of the Pantocrator is rarely a shade of purple. Even though Master Dionysius working at the beginning of the 16th century in Moscow had a palette rich in dark red shades, it is difficult to see any symbolism in that fact alone; it seems rather that we must explain this fact with artistic reasons. (plate 25)

Very often in writings about iconography, the Virgin's cloak is said to be purple. In fact, these passages refer to a red ochre or a dark cherry red; it is rarely dark blue. In these shades, might not the ancient purple have lost all its menacing character so as to recall only the richness and the deep peace of God's royal dignity?

Green

In the Scriptures, green (in Hebrew yârâq and in Greek *chloros*) is an aspect of nature; it expresses the life of vegetation. It is the color of grass (Job 7:12 and Song of Songs 6:11), leaves (Jer. 17:8), and trees (Is. 57:5 and Ps. 37 :35); it symbolizes growth and fertility. It has thus become a symbol of hope in non-religious language. Pseudo-Dionysius gave perhaps the most beautiful description of green: "It is youth and vitality" (*chloeras to neanikon kai akamon*). (14)

For the ancient Greeks, green was consecrated to Aphrodite the goddess of beauty; the green of the sea was an attribute of Poseidon and the Nereids, the divinities of water, which was the vital element for all vegetation. Thus by its link with the creation, the symbolism of the color green was common to all the civilizations of the Mediterranean basin.

The radiance of green is calm and neutral. It is situated between the movement in depth of blue and the forward outreach of red: in a composition with other colors, green harmonizes the whole work. Next to the color red, green produces a complementary effect. (15) This is especially evident in Novgorodian icons. The Pskov School used these two colors very much, practically neglecting the others. This is why Pskov icons have a severe and austere look. We can see this in the famous icon of the Praise of the Virgin. (plate 26) The figures are set on the background of a large green mountain. Certain Soviet researchers, see in this a reflection of ancient pagan beliefs of the northern regions: it is an image of "Mother Earth" to whom the members of certain sects still confessed their sins in the 14th century. We do not know why these painters perferred red and green. Perhaps it was simply because they could easily be obtained in the region.

The color green in its shades between yellow and blue is mainly used for people in icons. Next to red which symbolizes the sacrifice of the flower of the martyr's youth, green is used for martyrs' clothing; prophets and kings were also painted in green. In festal icons, many secondary persons were painted in green and red, and this was probably done for artistic reasons.

Brown

This color is composed of red, blue, and green. It also contains black. In relation to black, brown is a more lively color, but in itself it is still dull and reflects the density of matter. It lacks the radiance and the dynamism of pure colors. We find brown tones in everything that is considered earthly, but these tones do not have their own symbolism. They are present simply as objects. Neither does brown have its own meaning independent of that to which it gives color, like red for example. The various shades of brown, as they are found in the soil of different countries, allow the expression of a great variety of meanings. On festal icons, for example, rocks and buildings appear in brighter ochre tones which by their transparency and their luminosity compete with gold as if

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14. Pseudo-Dionysius, p. 66.
15. See below the section entitled "Icons and the Theory of Colors."

matter were transfigured by light and joy. Being close to black, the dark brown of monks and ascetics is, on the contrary, the sign of their poverty and their renunciation of earthly joys. Here, however, it is not the paint that gives meaning to the image; the painting only reflects the reality of the monastic life.

Black

Black is the total absence of light. The whole universe of colors is plunged into the night of black, the last color in the hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius. In Greece and Egypt, black was the color of the underworld gods and also of the sacrificial victims which were offered to counteract their dark schemes. In icons of the Last Judgment, the damned are painted in black. They have lost everything that is life; they have become shadows. Equally, on the Resurrection icon, hell is black; Lazarus' tomb from which he was raised is also black. The cavern under the cross of the crucifixion with the skull of Adam in it is also black. It is quite natural to find Adam's skull in a black hole since he is the symbol of death's entrance into the world through sin, and this sin must be erased by Christ's death. The cave of the Nativity is also black reminding us that the Saviour appeared "to give light to those who live in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Lk. 1:79) This black means, however, that like all men, this child, and man to be, must die in order to give eternal life to men. Finally, black is used for monks' habits especially those who wear the great schema, a symbol of the highest degree of the asceticism by which the monks have already died to this world.

The visual impact of black in an icon is practically as strong as the effect of white, even though it symbolizes the opposite. The color white represents the purest form of dynamism while black is the absence of everything, nothing.

Yellow

It is surprising that yellow has no place in the symbolic colors as conceived by Pseudo-Dionysius; he knew of "yellow gold" (*chrysoeides*), however. (16) For him, this color was too close to light itself and to the luster of gold for it to have its own symbolism. Though we can say that gold is equal to light, yellow has its own coloration and derives its life and meaning from light, as do the other colors. In its purest form, lemon yellow, yellow exudes a sustained sadness as we see on the icon of Christ being put into the tomb, an example from

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16. Pseudo-Dionysius, p. 66.

the Novgorodian School. (17) This characteristic seems to be confirmed by the Scriptures where it is the sign of bad harvests, blight (Deut. 28:22 and Hag. 2:17), and even leprosy.

Gold, on the other hand, unlike yellow, does not have any material coloration; it is the pure reflection of light, of brilliance. If the other colors derive their life and meaning from light, gold has its own proper brilliance, and thus it plays an important role in iconography; it is a symbol of the divine light. It properly belongs, therefore, to the chapter on light.

Conclusion

In the Christian world, colors have a definite symbolism, at least the main colors. This symbolism is very complex because of the influences and psychological conditions which have given names to colors. This process is very different from our modern conception. Dark blue, for example, was often interchangeable with purple. There is yet another problem that faces us in our time, to say nothing about the lack of documents on the subject of color symbolism: the problem of the precise meaning of vocabulary terms. Nonetheless, despite all the difficulties, we can guess at the complex of ideas behind each color, and this will help us to better understand the world of Byzantine art.

The Composition Of Colors

The symbolism of the basic colors sets a question before us: How was the painter able to combine colors in order to make a harmonious whole? The difficulty of such a combination is found precisely in the symbolic character of colors. Each color is self-defining, that is, it transmits its own message. On the visual plane, this is made evident by the fact that each shade radiates its coloring independently of the others, within well defined limits of course. What is more, in icons it is not aesthetic reasons which determine the choice of a color or its place in the composition; it is rather the symbolic meaning which is the determining factor. Keeping these conditions in mind, the creation of an icon takes place within very precise limits even if many colors are not defined by their symbolism or by their subject matter. As in western painting, Byzantine art distinguishes two systems of color combinations: polychromy and colorism. (18)

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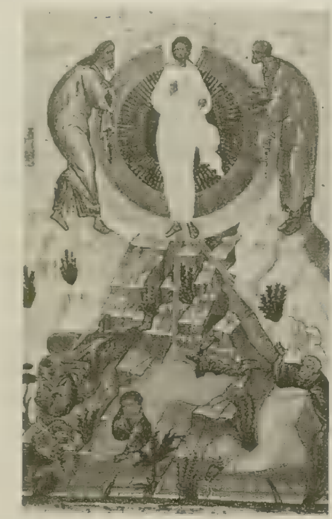
17. Konrad Onasch, *Die Ikonenmalerei*, p. 49.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-56.

Polychromy

This term designates a system in which each color keeps its value. The basic colors are set next to one another without intermediate shades or shadows. Thus each color has a relation with the others that it touches without being subordinated to the whole. In addition, we note that the color of an object often does not correspond to its color in nature; its iconic color, however, is determined by the idea that it symbolizes. The image thereby receives an abstract character which goes beyond the immediate reality it represents. At the same time, the image becomes, as it were, a grouping of signs issuing from the icon itself. In this way, we can explain the icon's expressionist character which is linked to its design and handling of light; this expressionism manifests the saints' mystical ecstacy in the glory of God. The icon thus witnesses to another reality, and the spectator must open himself to its message. Certain authors (Onasch and Schweinfurt) have used a modern expression to designate this aspect of the icon: *l'icône "affiche"*, that is, the icon as a modern poster. The faithful Christian allows himself to be penetrated by the radiance of the colors. This function makes us think of Pseudo-Dionysius' doctrine which, like that of St. John of Damascus, identified painted images as the last element of the heavenly and earthly hierarchies through which God communicates his light to the creation. The holy image is, therefore, the reflection of God's light which makes matter glow through the use of colors.



The Transfiguration.

Colorism

This system of combining colors works by mixing the basic tones and is founded on principles which are often opposed to those of polychromy. The numerous nuances and shades give to the whole a greater unity and bring out more distinctly the important parts of the image. In polychromy, the colors are chosen for their meaning and give a feeling of abstracted reality; colorism, however, uses the colors of nature, and objects are painted in the color of their natural material. Colorism mixes colors with light, sometimes with shadows, in space and seeks rather to render individual qualities by a rich repertory of shades and tones. Each color is related to the others and is subordinated to the whole, thanks to transitional colors which produce surprising aesthetic effects.

This system of color combination comes close to a conception that we can call impressionist. Instead of radiating the symbolic value of each color, colorism creates the atmosphere of an event in its uniqueness. This does not mean, however, that colorism seeks to represent the illusion of reality, that it comes close to naturalism, as in western painting. It does not betray the tradition which has specified the different colors, but it presents them as though combined in one vision. It brings out the sacred event of a feast in one global view, with all the relations among the persons, their emotions, and their intimate links with the mystery.

This tendency has appeared in the iconography of periods in which men have been sensitive to the experience of grace. The visionary ecstasy of the mystics goes beyond the rationality of dogmas, a rationality that is underscored by polychromy. These two systems do not, however, mutually exclude each other; we can often see a passage from one to the other, but in its clearest form, polychromy dominates Novgorodian art. This corresponds to other manifestations of Novgorod's rationalistic conception of iconography: geometric forms, inversed perspective, and interior light. As an example, let us take the Transfiguration icon of the second half of the 15th century. (19) (plate 27) What strikes us here is the pure white of Christ's garment, on the background of the dark blue-green mandorla in three circles. Within the white of the garment, there is no shaping, only the delicate lines of the folds. In the same way, in the lower part of the icon, the brilliant red of St. John's garment stands out from the green background of the mountain; this effect comes from the complementarity of the two colors.

The conception of Theophane the Greek's icon is completely different. For the most part, the colors have been worked up in transparency, that is drawn and put on opaque colored background. These colors are not pure but mixed with others, and they thus form a whole. In the light of this whole, Christ appears in a slightly tinted white, above the ground where the apostles have fallen pell-mell. Christ is in the center of the mystical shadow of a blue-green mandorla. What we see here is not so much the truths of the mystery but the event as a mystical experience. We see this same conception in Rublev's icon of the Trinity (20) (plate 29) or in the icon of Boris and Gleb (21), Moscow School, and this dispite the blue and red horses. In general, the Moscow School had an affinity for colorism.

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19. The National Art History Museum of Novgorod.
20. It dates from 1411; the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.
21. Around 1430; the Tretyakov Gallery.

Icons And The Theory Of Colors

The masters of modern painting have been fascinated by the color of icons. Perhaps we can say that icons are at least in part responsible for their research in the realm of colors. Color composition, however, does not follow any theoretical principles but results from the symbolism of the colors themselves. The importance of symbolism, however, did not eliminate the knowledge and use of complementary colors, and they were often used with great mastery.

The phenomenon of complementary colors, up to now unexplained by science, consists of the following effect: any color which is stared at for about thirty seconds produces on the retina the impression of the opposite color in the chromatic circle when the person looks at a white surface. Red thus produces green, etc. The seven contrasts that we find in the modern theory of colors (22) can also be observed on icons. We have the contrast between two effects of color, for example: the contrast of the color in itself, blue and red; the contrast clair-obscur (chiaroscuro) between a dark color and its brighter shades; and the contrast hot-cold between close shades of blue and those that gravitate toward red and yellow.

These phenomena have not yet been deeply studied by research in iconography. And if we are careful to take the historical and religious context into account, we will see that it was not the principles of a scientific theory which guided the iconographers; it was, rather, their talent and their minds which were open to the marvels of the creation. They were, on the other hand, constrained by the requirements of the tradition in which they lived and created. The icon has thus become a work of art which reveals to our eyes a beauty that goes beyond us, a beauty which is the reflection of another world.

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22. For example, see Johannes Itten, *art et la couleur*, Dessain and Tolra, Paris, 1973.

Chapter 11

Light

Introduction

In order for man to recognize the form of physical objects, light must be reflected from them; if not, they remain invisible and unknown. Light rays strike nature and forms appear out of the darkness. In art, light also functions as a revealing medium, unknown but indispensable, passed over in silence but very important nonetheless.

In medieval painting, we can already see that the understanding of light had begun to evolve because its role was then understood within the mystical conceptions of the time; these conceptions closely linked knowledge and elevation of the spirit in God's light. In modern, western painting, light has followed a very different path of development, the path of naturalism which resulted in impressionism where light dominates and absorbs form and colors.

These pictorial worlds, however, do not allow us to grasp the complete role of light. The primitive imagination was struck by the contrast between light and darkness and associated a symbolism with them that was at first instinctive but then became more and more reflected on: light and darkness make us think of life and death, good and evil. This is the language of the most ancient religious beliefs.

This polarity translates a similar polarity in human existence. Light cannot be grasped; it is untouchable while what is not light becomes dense and opaque matter, matter which is expressed by the color black. The absence of light is, finally, the sign of a solid object, the sign of a material nature.

In art, man transposes material nature into the domain of precision, measurement, and quantity. We can already see in primitive art that the body is distinguished from the background by precise contours thus creating intelligible form. In the same way, the black figures of the first Greek vases show the opacity of matter on a bright background, in itself a sign of the world of the gods. It is not difficult to discern here a first and feeble attempt to elaborate a spiritual symbolism.

As soon as values take on form, such as in the movement from shadow to light, we go beyond a certain limit, and we have the new experience of the intelligible limits of form: that of intensity. This new experience of intensity appeals to the imagination and brings us close to life itself. This technical process at first only aims at realism, the illusion of forms, but in this very process light begins to dominate so as to acquire a more general significance. Independent of space and measurement, light has from this moment on its own proper existence, and its own resonance, its own proper value.

This original power of light appears when it frees itself from the limits that form and matter have imposed on it. It jumps out from the background, frees itself from the opacity of matter, and makes visible what the physical eyes fail to see. Light thus becomes immaterial, a sensible symbol of the invisible.

The Ancient Roots of Byzantine Art

It is from this basic principle that Byzantine art, whose very soul is light, takes its origin, the principle that sees light as the sensible symbol of the invisible. The roots of this principle are found in antiquity during a time when classical beauty was still dominated by form. In fact, despite their artistic value, the sculptures of antiquity were first and foremost defined as incarnations of numbers. Pythagorus, 5th century B.C., is quoted as saying that "number is the essence of things." Before examining how the ancients thought about light, let us recall the nature of the ancient physics of vision. According to ancient science, the eye emitted its own light, and the object did the same. Sight took place when a homogeneous environment or medium was formed between the object and the eye. Whatever the value of this "scientific" conception, the theory is very important since by it we can understand why vision was considered to be "transforming." We can thus see to what degree the contemplation of the icon has its roots not only in the religious ideas of antiquity but also its science.

What is more, for Plato absolute being, the principle of all existence, is the Good. The Good engenders in man Truth and Intelligence and is reflected in the material world by light; in this way, light loses it's purely physical character because through light God communicates His truth, goodness, and beauty to man.

In Neo-Platonism, Plato's key idea was reworked and became the constituative element of a new philosophical system. Reality in all its dimensions is penetrated by light which gives beauty and moral goodness to beings. We can thus see the elaboration of a hierarchy of value in matter itself: fire, lightening, and gold are beautiful in themselves because they are light. Other things are only beautiful in that they reflect light. Without light, matter is dark and heavy. As in the mystery religions of the East, we see the appearance of a duality: the opposition of light and matter, of good and evil. In the thought of Plontinus, the founder of the Neo-Platonic school, light is clothed with a religious meaning; light alone allows us to escape from the human condition, from the world of matter: "In your totality, you are true light..."

In order to perceive this interior light, we must substitute the inner eyes for our physical eyes. We must transcend both physical sight and rational thought by an "intellectual vision" which alone can open us up to the contemplation of Being so that we can identify ourselves with it. The soul thus is joined to the One, to God, by abandoning itself in order to receive "the ineffable and indescribable vision" of its light. In the face of this reality, everything in and of itself becomes inexistant. And here we have a paradoxical turn about: natural light becomes darkened because, being subject to the condition of matter, it becomes a negation of real light. Created light and night become identical in that neither can help us perceive the forms of this world. The human mind, the *nous*, and everything with it, disappears in the splendor of the uncreated light.

Patristic Thought

This philosophy of light profoundly influenced Christian thought from the 3rd century on. St. Augustine fervently read Plotinus and was penetrated by his ideas, but the author who really left his mark on the Middle Ages, as well as on its art, was Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. As we have already seen, the philosophical value of Pseudo-Dionysius, who wrote at the beginning of the 5th century, rests in the fact that he rethought Neo-Platonism in terms of the Christian revelation (1) Even if he was not able to avoid certain philosophical ambiguities due to his use of pantheistic expressions, he did create a system of thought whose homogeneity was rarely attained by Christian thinkers after him.

In the West, his mystical and aesthetic vision of light constituted the foundation of such thinkers as John Scotus Erigena and Robert Grossetete who wrote that "light constitutes the perfection and beauty of corporeal objects." For

Bonaventure and the scholastic theologians also, light had a sacred character. Light participates somehow in the properties of God; it rises above matter and space, multiplies itself, and spreads out over all being.

Grodecki (2) has thus noted that light played a predominant role in the stained glass windows of Gothic cathedrals. In paintings, light makes colors shine and thus gives them life; in stained glass windows, however, light unites itself to colors and by penetrating them, it becomes one with the coloration of the glass. For this reason, certain theologians have seen light as a symbol of the Holy Spirit descending into the Virgin Mary.

For Byzantine art, the conception of light constitutes the soul of its aesthetic vision. As André Grabar has shown (3), Byzantine art has always sought to go beyond the forms of the material world. Mosaics with their glittering colors and icons with their golden background and their figures woven out of light attempt to make visible something other than just the material world. (figures 53, 54, and 55) The works of

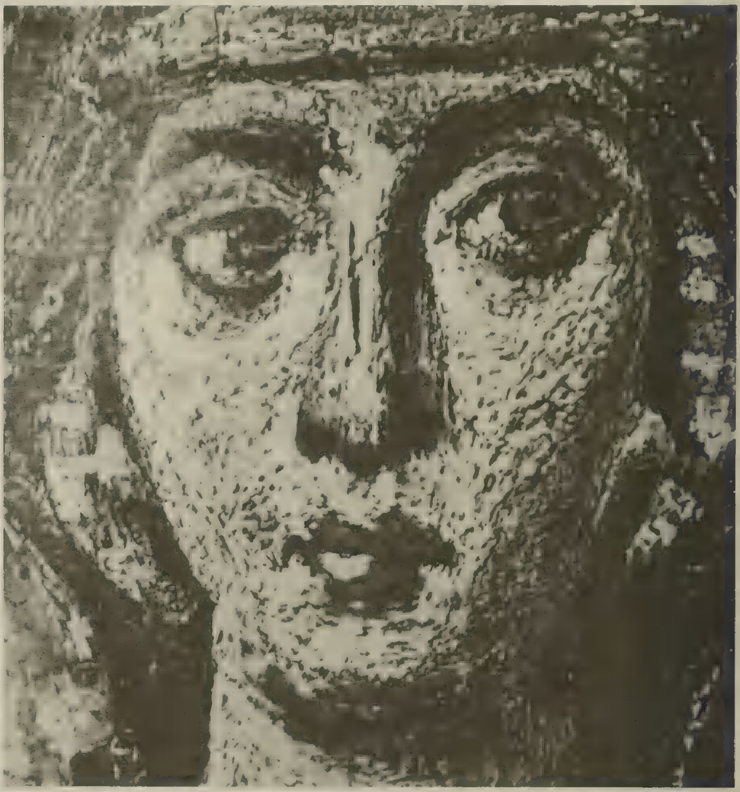

Fig. 53
***The Enthroned Virgin between Sts. Theodore and George**, detail: St. Catherine's Monastery, 6th c., encaustic.*

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1. To try to deal with Pseudo-Dionysius as the one who introduced Christian thinking into Neo-Platonism would go beyond the scope of our subject. Vladimir Los sky, *Vision of God*, The Faith Press, London, 1963, thinks that, on the contrary, Pseudo-Dionysius adapted the philosophical technique of Neo-Platonism in order to defeat it on its own ground (pp. 99-100).

2. René Huyghe, *L'art et l'âme*, (*Art and the Soul*), Flammarion, Paris, 1960, p. 99.

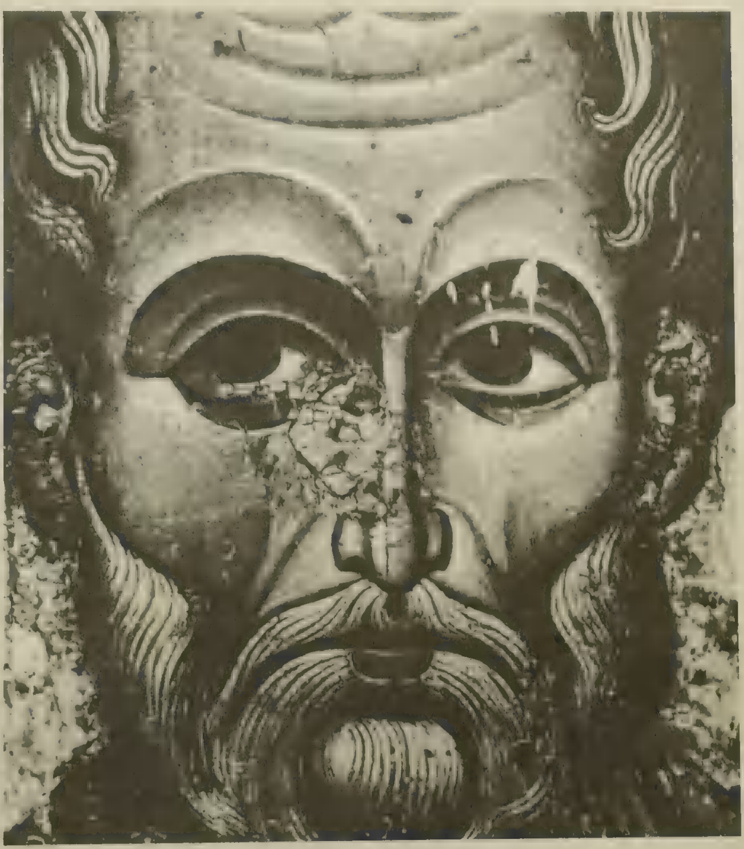

Fig. 54
***St. Nicholas:** Novgorod School, 13th c. (Russian Museum, Leningrad).*

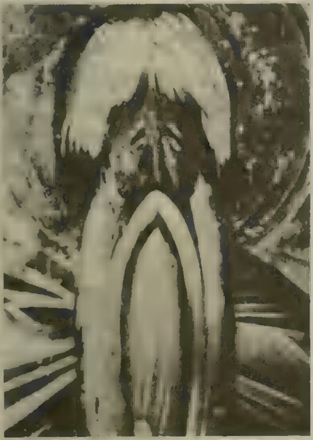

Fig. 55
***The Stylite:** Theophane the Greek, fresco of the Church of the Saviour's Transfiguration, Novgorod, 1378.*

Byzantine art present themselves as perpetually irrupting, radiant energy, reflections of the uncreated light of God. The stars which gravitate around the glittering cross in the vaults of Galla Placidia's tomb in Ravenna go beyond all decor; they become an "ecstacy of light."

The Doctrine of Pseudo-Dionysius

Due to the importance of Pseudo-Dionysius' doctrine for the religious culture of the Byzantine world, let us stop here and examine more fully the structures of this doctrine (4) whose theological foundation is found in the idea of God's absolute transcendence, *hypertheos theotés*, the supradivine divinity. But in that God is also called light, *phôs*, we are faced with the following question: How can this transcendent, purely intelligible light, *phôs noeón*, be communicated since man cannot receive it except by "vision," *theôris*, and by an "interior knowledge," *episteme?*

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3. André Grabar, "La representation de l'intelligible dans l'art byzantin du Moyen Age" ("The Representation of the Intelligible in Medieval Byzantine Art"), *Actes du VIe congres international d' études byzantines*, Paris, 1948, t. 2, Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Paris, 1951, pp. 127-43.

4. René Roques, *L'univers dyonisien* (*The Dionysian Universe*), Aubier, Paris , 1954.

This question concerning the transcendent light includes another which directly concerns the icon: How can the spiritual world be reflected and take form in the earthly world, in matter?

Pseudo-Dionysius' doctrine has a double structure. (5) 1) A hierarchical order reigns in the intelligible cosmos, *kosmos noetos*, and in the sensible cosmos, *kosmos aisthetos*. This order is characteristic of Pseudo-Dionysius' philosophy . The immaterial light of God is first and foremost communicated to the supreme hierarchies of the bodiless powers of heaven, that is to the first triad made up of seraphim, cherubim, and thrones. These then transmit the light to the lower hierarchies until it reaches the last power by which it is given to the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the form of sacraments. The ecclesiastical hierarchy has the task of administering the sacraments and transmitting them to men for their purification and illumination. The relations between the hierarchies are determined by harmony, *harmonia*, symphony, *symphonia*, and symmetry, *symmetria*. Measure, *metron*, and number, *arithmos*, are the constituent elements of these relations.

The beauty of the Dionysian universe has its roots in an aesthetic vision, and the language in which it is expressed is that of the creative artist. In the beginning, there was not chaos, a universe of blind and destructive forces, but cosmos, a universe where harmony reigned. The soul of this universe is the movement of the divine eros, *erôtiké kinésis* which itself has a rhythm, a threefold rythmn.

The origin of all is the supradivine essence in its eternal immobility. The movement of love which proceeds from the Father spreads out his light on creatures. By knowledge, *episteme*, and contemplation, *theoria*, creatures purify themselves of everything that blocks the realization of the likeness with God and thus elevate themselves to God to become "deified." Thus, as a third phase, there is a movement of return.

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5. The works of Pseudo-Dionysius have been commented on in different ages: in the 6th century by St. Maximus the Confessor; in the 14th century by St. Gregory Palamas and his adversaries. Although his symbolism has been interpreted differently in each commentary, the fundamental orientation remains recognizable throughout.

Another characteristic of Pseudo-Dionysius' doctrine is 2) the interior structure of each hierarchy which has a specified essence and whose goal, *skopos*, is to be like God and to unite with him according to the defined properties of each. Among themselves, the hierarchies are not at the same level of existence; between any two hierarchies, there is only analogy. In fact, between the last angelic hierarchy and that of the bishops, dissimilarity outweighs similarity since each hierarchy receives the intelligible light according to its state of existence. In the same way, between the hierarchy of bishops and that of laymen, there is a difference characterized by the same principle of analogy. Consequently, each order must discover what it is permitted to know of the divine intelligibility. God reveals his intelligibility directly to the first hierarchy and indirectly through intermediaries to the other lower hierarchies. By descending from one order to another, the light loses some of its brilliance so that finally in matter, it is only a weak reflection.

Roques sets out the consequence of this doctrine for the social structure of the Byzantine Church:

> *This order is first and foremost social, and even somewhat material. It puts the subject in a very defined situation and imposes on him very exact functions and very precise dependencies. It constitutes a hierarchy of classes in which tasks are very precisely distributed, rigorously convergent, and perfectly unified; these classes must effectively organize, administer, and govern the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This is for the exterior. The juridical and social aspect, however, is only the outer surface of the interior and spiritual reality that sustains it since ordination definitely seeks the divinization of the ministers and of the initiates. From this point of view, the material and juridical order of the Church appears no doubt as a necessary condition, but a simple condition.* (6)

In the negative influence of these structures, K. Onasch, following Klibanov (7), sees the root of the medieval crisis in Russia: the superiority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, through its communication of the divine light, causes the subordinate individual to lose his value since he has no way of acting against the abuse of authority. (8) In fact, the currents inside the Church, like the heresies, all had reforming

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6. Roques, p. 282.
7. Alexandre I. Klibanov, *Reformacionnye dvizenia v Rossii 14-pervoi polovine 16 vekov* (*Reform Movements in Russia from the 14th Century to the First Half of the 16th Century*), Publications of the Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 1960, p. 326.
8. Konrad Onasch, *Das Problem des Lichtes in der Ikonenmalerei Andrej Rublevs* (*The Problem of Light in the Iconography of Andrei Rublev*), Akademie-Verlag, Berlin, 1962, pp. 22-3.

tendencies. It remains, nonetheless, that these social consequences show the importance of Pseudo-Dionysius' ideas; they were necessarily to have their reflection in art.

Dionysius' conceptual structure can also be seen in his system of signs which is also a structure of analogy. The signs are thus called "dissimilar symbols," *anomoia symbola*, that is, their intelligible content must be completed by a negative, "apophatic", expression in order to reflect the true essence of God. In fact, we are not permitted to describe the transcendence of God by sensible and material symbols. Even though the Areopagite called God "sun" or "light," he was quick to dissolve this positive image by the negative expression "brilliantly shining darkness" which is more appropriate to God's existence.

Pseudo-Dionysius' Influence on Iconography

The icon of the Transfiguration (plate 27) shows the direct influence of Dionysius' conception. Christ is represented in a mandorla made up of three concentric circles which is the symbol of God's light. Starting from the exterior circle, this light becomes darker and darker as we move toward the center where it is a dark blue. Thus natural light loses its brilliance and is spiritualized to the point of losing its natural properties.

The influence of Pseudo-Dionysius' aesthetic vision on Byzantine art shows itself in an important element of iconography, the use of gold. According to him, gold manifests "an indestructible, prodigious, inexhaustible and immaculate splendor." (9) Gold is the reflection of "the sun's brilliance." It is found on the layer of earthly things that are closer to the light than the more material layers of pigments. Gold is not so much a color as glimmering light and brilliance. If colors get their life from light, then gold is itself active light, radiance. This feature becomes obvious when we look at icons having a red background or , which is very rare, one that has a blue background. A golden background has a stronger radiance than does a colored background. This fact is expressed in Slavic iconographic manuals by simply using the word "light," *svet* to mean "background." Gold is found then everywhere that the participation in the life of God is emphasized: especially in halos but also on vestments, clothing, sacred vases and gospel books. Christ's clothing is often covered with golden filigree-work, *assist*, and is a symbol of His divinity. Sometimes even, this "assist" carries over onto thrones and architectural ornamentation; it is also

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9. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

found on Byzantine imperial documents to underline their sacred character.

Nonetheless, the use of gold seems to be linked to the technique of painting. The first icons were mostly painted following the encaustic technique, for example the icons of Mount Sinai, 5th-8th centuries, where gold was very rare. Perhaps this was because of technical difficulties but also because the icon had not yet acquired a deep and precise theological meaning. After iconoclasm, the encaustic method disappeared and egg tempera became the rule. This new method allowed a better mastery of drawing and coloring, and the smooth, glossy background lent itself better to the use of gold. We probably, however, have here an influence of theology: in fact, the writings of the defenders of images, St. John of Damascus, the patriarch St. Germanos, and St. Theodore Studite, contained numerous elements of Dionysius' thought. The hold of Pseudo-Dionysius on the Byzantine aesthetic vision has not yet been systematically studied and defined. (10)

The golden background is important in order to better understand the optical structures of the icon. The painting participates in the very dynamism of gold. In western painting, from the Renaissance on, we have become used to seeing lights and shadows which have little to do with whether the source of light is inside or outside the image itself.

It is very different with an icon; icons do not attempt to give the illusion of reality, an "illusionism" engendered by the opposition of light and shadow. There is not "one" source of light; the image and the light are not separated. The light is immanent within the image and it radiates out directly toward the spectator. (plate 32) In western painting, by playing with lights and shadows, a dialogue is set up. The result is an active relation between two sides. In an icon, however, the image shines out toward the spectator who can only open himself to its light from another world. We can thus easily see how the ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite are reflected in icons.

Natural Light and Spiritual Light

In our opinion, it would not be proper to limit ourselves to abstract aesthetical considerations because the light of the icon has nothing to do with natural light. Iconic light has become incarnate grace, materialized, and it must be received as such in contemplation. Contemplation is not simply a

10. The first attempts are found in the works of Panayotis A. Michelis, *Esthétique de l'art byzantin*, (*The Aesthetic Vision of Byzantine Art*) and André Grabar, see note 3.

passive reception but requires all the dynamism of the spirit; the light of God must therefore be assimilated in order to be transmitted to others. Man thus enters into the divine eros. The knowledge of the intelligible light becomes illumination, and thereby man moves toward the brilliantly shining darkness of the absolute mystery.

In a concrete case, let us see what the iconographer does to make light radiate out toward the spectator. The icon of Thomas Sunday is a characteristic work of the Novgorodian School. Why, especially in this school, does inversed perspective and self-generated, interior light, a light which comes from no exterior source, appear in such purity? This question has not yet sufficiently been studied. (plate 32)

This icon represents Christ in the middle of the apostles on Sunday evening after the resurrection. (Jn. 20:24-9) On his right, the doubting Thomas touches the wound in Christ's side to convince himself that the resurrected one is really the same person that had been pierced on the cross. The scene takes place in the upper room where the Last Supper had been celebrated, but according to the principles of inversed perspective, the scene is represented out-of-doors. The upper room is thus the building on the right. The whole work is governed by the light which emanates from the background; this golden background competes with the bright shades of the wall and the upper room. The master painter has succeeded in giving to the colors a luminosity that is striking by its transparency and purity. On this background, the forms of the figures stand out distinctly. According to the Novgorodian style, their clothing is painted in pure colors, and this gives them all their brilliance, especially the red. These colors are enhanced by the reflected light rays, a procedure which is less pronounced with the red which is already intense. However, the reflected light rays are not placed as if they come from an exterior light source but are situated on objects that are closest to the spectator. Thus the painter obtained a modeling which does not give the illusion of a body in space. We thus have here an example of another form of self-generated, interior light.

Another function of the reflected rays of self-generated light consists in underlining various movements and gestures: thus Thomas' arm and Christ's right arm are the only ones in this icon to show these concentrated reflections, that is touches of white with shades of complementary colors. This feature underlines Christ's gesture as he is showing his wound, a gesture which is more important than that of Thomas.

It is proper to recall that these reflections of self-generated, interior light — even if they in fact suppose the observation of nature — are treated as a spiritual phenomenon. A light emanates from the divine essence as an active force and produces a passive effect: what is suggested here is the reflection of eternal ideas in matter.

In the paintings of the Palaeologue period, this effect was not as strong because at the time, the rigorous structures of the Novgorodian school were not available; the scene thus develops in emotion and movement. The icon of the Crucifixion, 14th century, describes the dramatic events in all their detail. (figure 56) The style is narrative and broken up into episodes; it is expressed in a design of movements that seem to remain inside the composition: John's conversation with the Virgin; the three soldiers at the foot of the cross; the group of Jews with the centurion Longuinus at the right. Consequently the interior light loses some of its dynamic character. It is very different in the icon of the Doubting Thomas where everything is bright and centered on the event itself. The icon then radiates out toward the person who contemplates it; structures and light form one single entity.

Despite everything, as we have seen on these icons of dif-

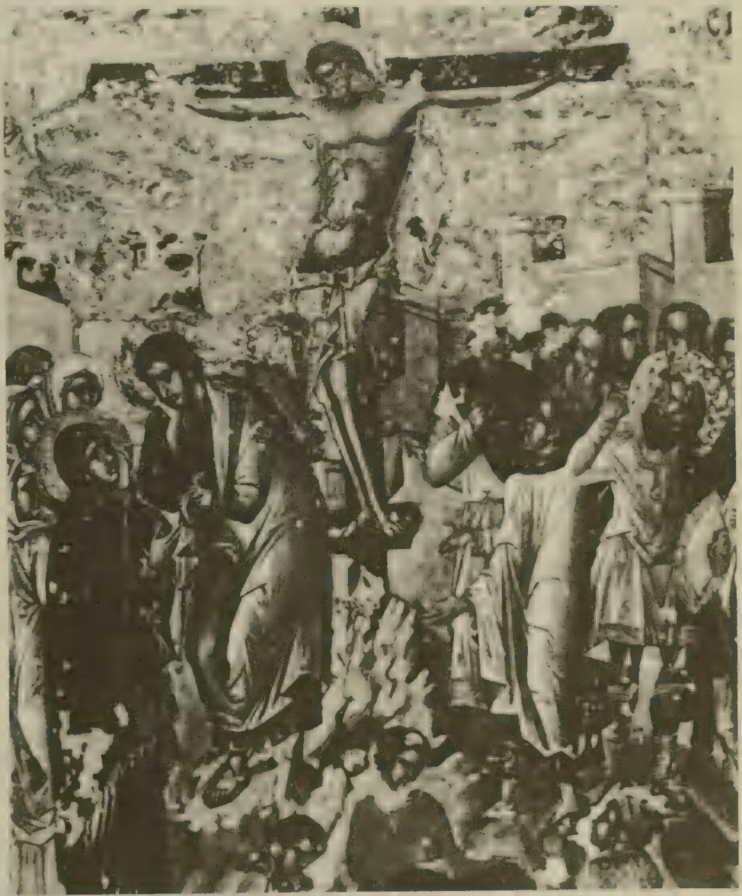


Fig. 56
***The Crucifixion:** Patmos, 16th c.*

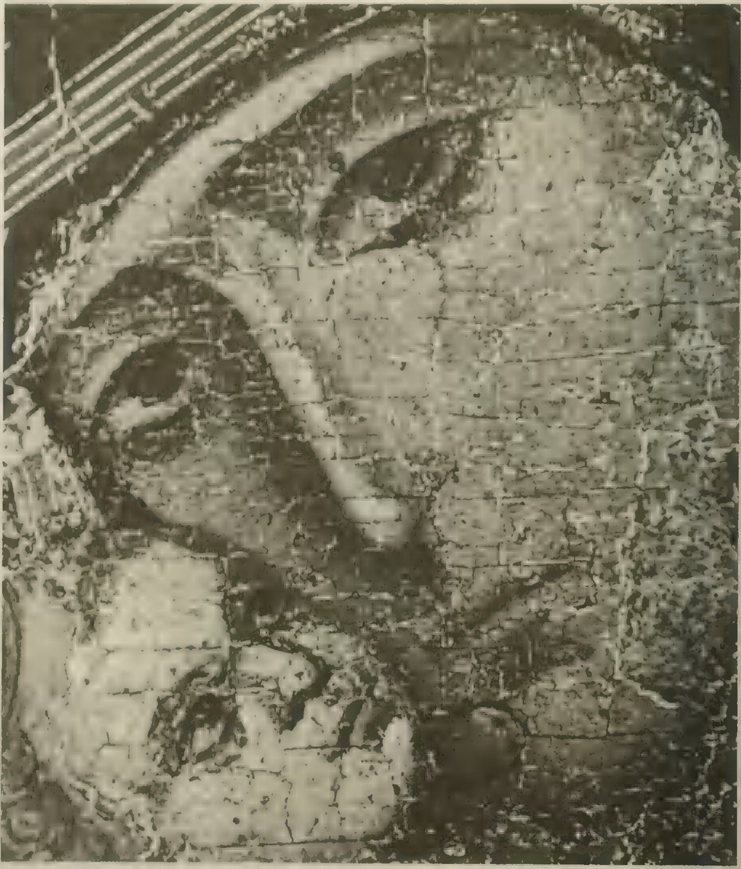
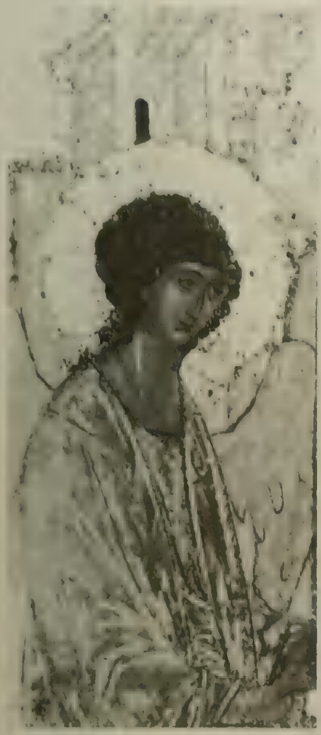


Fig. 57
***The Virgin of Vladimir* (head):** *Constantinople, 11th c. (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow).*

ferent epoches, the inner light and gold do not necessarily exclude natural light. The dominant ideas of the Middle Ages up to the 14th century certainly do give a theological justification to the inner light, but the absence of documents which make clear the rules for painting an icon allow us to suppose that iconographers painted according to the aesthetic vision of their age which no doubt allowed a certain freedom to the artist.

Thus, although the theological meaning of the inner light is to dematerialize this visible and sensible world, a form of illusionism sometimes does appear in the play of light and shadow. The phenomenon can be observed when space is represented: alongside inversed perspective, we see forms in linear perspective as well as the consequence which that entails, the appearance of shadows. We have a surprising example of this in the icon of the Virgin of Vladimir.

In this icon, we can point out certain procedures that come very close to naturalism: on the right, a very strong light falls on the faces thus creating a clear reflection on the Virgin's nose. The area where the faces touch remains in the shadow. The effect is surprising. The hieratic impression which we can feel in other icons here gives way to intimacy; eternity seems to become incarnate in the moment. Is it the artist's intention thus to express the mystery of the incarnation, the irruption of God in time? The effect of light seems to be one of the reasons why the Virgin of Vladimir has fascinated the faithful of all times. (figure 57)



We can see the same phenomena on certain icons of Andrei Rublev. (figure 58) The three icons of the Zvenigorod iconostasis as well as some found in the Holy Trinity Monoastery show faces that are illuminated by an exterior light source. On the right, the light falls on the forehead, the nose, and the cheeks and then slides down the neck onto the clothes. It thus creates shadow zones. In this technique, the light reflections are rendered in a different way from that found in Novgorodian icons which use white hatching marks as in Greek icons *(ozhiuki,*"vivid lines"); these lines are applied, however, as a function of the inner light and not as a reflection of an exterior light source. As for this brightening, enlightening technique, *plavko* or *plav'*, it was already used in previous icons, improved on, and perfectly mastered by Rublev; it avoids hatching marks as much as possible in order to make the light shine through hardly perceptible nuances. Thus we have the radiance of a glowing, glissening light, which gives unity and harmony to the artistic modeling.

In his famous Trinity icon, Rublev went even farther. (plate 29) He preferred transparent colors in blue-green tones as well as the technique of scumbling, that is softening the outlines or color by applying thin coats of opaque color. The result is that the scene of the three heavenly visitors is enlightened like a luminous cloud.

Rublev's contemporaries were already fascinated by this effect and called it *dymon pisano*, that is transparent like a cloud. It reproduced an observable natural phenomenon in which colors change in relation to the depth of space and melt away in blue-green tones; the result is that the contrasts disappear. (11)

The clothing of the angel on the left in the Trinity icon manifests Rublev's mastery of the scumbling technique. The blue of the chiton-tunic, enhanced by the reflections of light on the edges of the folds, shines through the delicate pink-purplish tones of the himation-mantle. This gives the impression of a transparent material. The whole of the figure has a surprisingly concrete look about it. Rublev obtained these results by his precise and supple drawing, the scumbling technique, and the clear reflections on the folds of the

11. In western painting, this technique corresponds to sfumato or the atmospheric light, techniques carried to their perfection by Leonardo da Vinci.

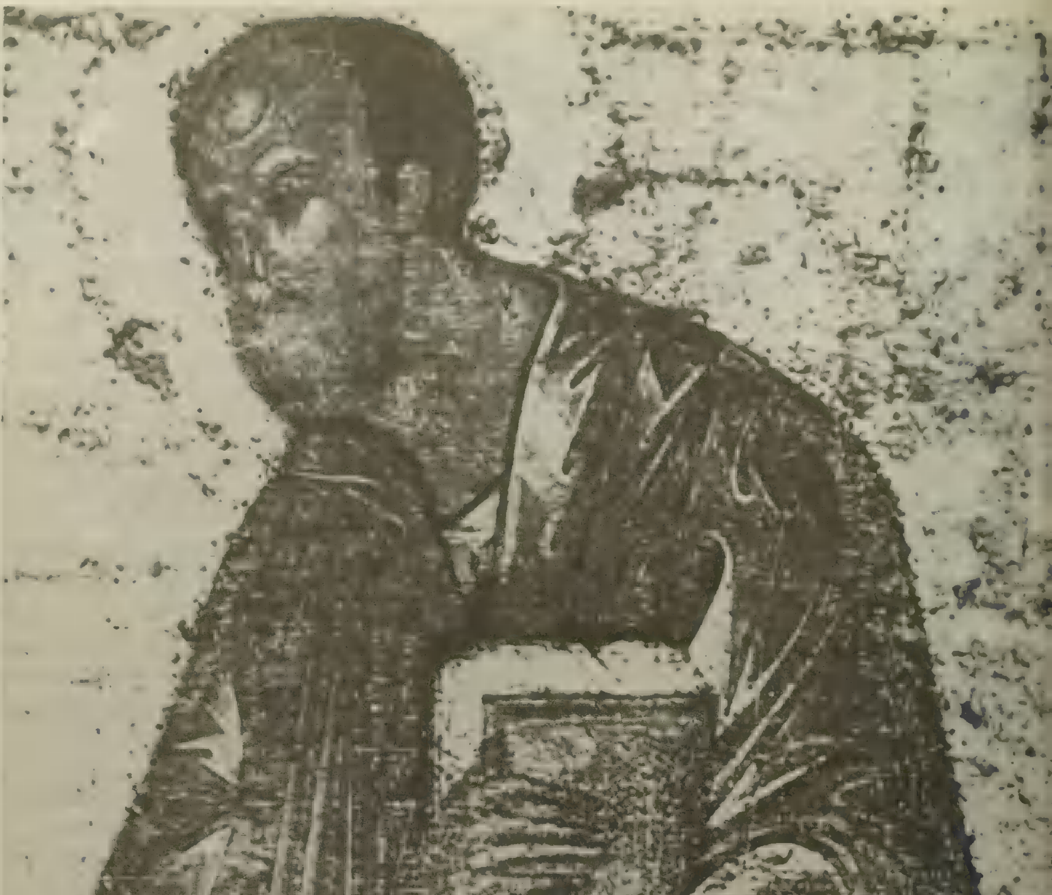


Fig. 58
St. Paul: *Rublev,*
Iconostasis of Holy Trinity
Monastery's Cathedral,
Zagorsk, around 1420.

garments. His icons thus seem to be more natural than those of the Palaeologue period. By their transparency, they at the same time reflect a harmony of matter and mind. (plate 28)

This fact has led certain authors to think that Rublev painted in the open air, that he observed nature, and that this observation influenced his painting. In Rublev's work, then, we have the appearance of new conception. Onasch even spoke of Rublev's discovery of a natural light, at the same period as the Van Dyck brothers in the West.

Despite their unquestionable influence on medieval culture, the ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius do not constitute the essence of the icon. These ideas have, however, given it its theological structures and are certainly important elements of its dynamic quality. Nonetheless, on Rublev's icons we see the appearance of new elements which seem to contradict the Dionysian aesthetical vision.

Natural light interrupts the image's movement toward the spectator, and atmospheric light seems to put the represented persons even farther off. The same tendency manifests itself in the fact that Rublev covered up forms that stood out too much because they were drawn in inversed perspective. The essential nature of the icon is found in the fact that it is the expression of Christian revelation. Now Rublev was considered by several councils of Moscow to be the model for other iconographers. Are we dealing here then simply with an artistic language, or rather is not the artistic language the expression of the spirit of an age?

The Influence of the Hesychastic Controversy

Certain authors would like to see in this new aesthetic vision the reflection of a new era's outlook. (12) Their arguments are founded on historical studies and merit consideration, and they can also help us to understand better the problems that were to crop up later on about iconography.

In the Byzantium of the Comnenian period, 11th-12th centuries, the study of ancient philosophy, science, and mathematics had already provoked a rationalistic current which called the ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius into question. This scientific current continued to develop and resulted in an open opposition at the time of the hesychastic controversy as is shown in the conflict between St. Gregory Palamas and his adversary Barlaam of Calabria. The question of light

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12. Onasch, note 8; Michel Alpatov, *Andrej Rublev*, Iskusstvo, Moscow, 1959; Dimitri S. Lihacev, *Chelovek literature drevnej Rusi* (*Man in the Literature of Ancient Russia*), Akademia Nauk SSSR, Moscow-Leningrad, 1958.

most clearly shows the different visions advocated by the two sides. St. Gregory was the author of a commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius' works, and he considered the divine light of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor to be an uncreated light, inaccessible to human intelligence.

For St. Gregory, the light of Mount Tabor was not the divine essence but its energy; it was a property of the divine essence. The distinction between essence and energy is not therefore in contradiction with the simplicity of God. Creatures cannot participate in the essence of God, but they can participate in his energy: in creatures, God manifests Himself by his energies, *dynameis*, "multiplying Himself without leaving His unity, and creatures advance toward deification by transcending God's manifestations in the creation, the hierarchical illuminations in order to enter into the darkness, to attain to the union beyond the *nous*, beyond all knowledge, all sensible or intelligible manifestation of God." (13)

For Barlaam, on the other hand, the light of Mount Tabor was not the true divine light but a purely material light. Thus, to perceive this light, it was not necessary to be in ecstasy but to have logical reasoning which surpasses the dignity of the Taboric light and even the angelic light.

Barlaam and his disciple Akindynos were condemned as heretics and enemies of the Byzantine state by the council of Constantinople in 1341. Hesychasm thus became the official doctrine of the Byzantine Church, and it has kept its importance for Orthodoxy up to our times.

Theophane The Greek And Rublev

This discussion about Hesychasm had profoundly marked the Byzantine Church and spirituality in the 14th century; it also found expression in art. Lazarev (14) was thus led to see a key to the style of Theophane the Greek in the two opposed currents. After lengthy visits in Constantinople and on Mount Athos, Theophane greatly impressed the artists of his time by his frescoes in Novgorod at the end of the 14th century. He was an artist of great originality and was a witness to the heated discussion in Constantinople, himself being strongly influenced in favor of hesychastic ideas; he was also a keen observer of natural phenomena. (15)

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13. Lossky, p. 101.

14. Victor Lazarev, *Feofan greki ego skola* (*Theophane the Greek and His School*), Iskustvo, Moscow, 1961.

15. Mihail A. Illine, *Rskusstvo moskovskoy Rusi epohi Feofana Grekai Andreja Rubleva* (*The Art of Moscovite Russia at the Time of Theophane the Greek and Andrei Rublev*), Iskusstvo, Moscow, 1976, pp. 31-42.

His great sensitivity, his very characteristic and life-like figures, as though taken from everyday life, show that his concern was not to interpret the stylized forms of previous times. We see the same phenomenon in his conception of light . He dissolves the hard accents of Greek icons into small precise lines of pure white so that they give the impression of reflecting natural light. At the same time, he abandoned abstract polychromy and preferred natural and local colors. Thus without giving the illusion of nature, he created a true impressionism of light. Andrei Rublev, being his disciple or companion during many years of work together, could certainly not remain untouched by this conception.

Rublev also must have known about the theological opinions of his time. (16) Far from being a recluse, he worked on a team with other artists and lived in the communities of the Holy Trinity Monastery as well as St. Andronikov's in Moscow where he showed himself very open to world events. He was also the friend of Epiphanius the Wise, a theologian, historian, and hagiographer to whom Russia is greatly indebted for many works. Epiphanius had a critical mind and did not share the opinions then prominent in Moscow. He was even part of an opposition movement that had been active for sometime.

Archbishop Vassili of Novgorod in fact wrote a doctrinal letter to Bishop Theodore of Tver (17) in which he stated that the light of Tabor was a natural phenomenon and that spiritual paradise was not accessible to men. We see here then the rationalistic ideas of Barlaam which were present in northern Russia. Onasch saw another influence in the spirituality of the monasteries themselves; here the person of St. Nil Sorsky still remains determinant; he preached a spirituality heavily influenced by the ancient ascetical ideal of the northern monks, founded on poverty and the keeping of the heart, hostile to liturgical pomp which fosters emotions of a far too aesthetical nature. This orientation makes us think of Rublev's Trinity icon in which there are no aesthetical means or techniques that try to influence the mind of the spectator. The beauty, harmony, and silence of this icon invite us to meditation.

All these contrasting influences can help us discover the richness of Rublev's art. We cannot reproach in him any naturalistic or rationalistic tendencies; we can only recognize that the ideas of his time influenced his work. In his icons, however, especially by his introduction of new ideas concern-

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16. Vladimir A. Plugine, *Mirovozrenie Andreja Rubleva* (*Andrei Rublev's Conception of the World*), Publications of the University of Moscow, 1974, pp. 47-56.

17. The fact that this document, 1347, is the only one of this period does not diminuish its value since the two men played an important role in the Russia of the 14th century.

ing light, Rublev was able to harmonize opposing ideas, and this is a sign of a true work of art. The senses are spiritualized, and the spirit is united to matter.

The Inner Light Of Icons

At the end of this historical presentation, we are faced with this question: To what degree is the inner light essential for the icon? Is it the only possible technique for expressing the spiritual dimension?

We apparently have the answer in the theology of the icons itself: in the icon, we see a divine reality which goes beyond the dimensions of this earthly world but which at the same time respects this earthly world because it is created by God to become transfigured in his Spirit. If the representation loses the character of God's mystery, if it reduces this mystery to the sensible forms of matter, the icon loses its soul. In

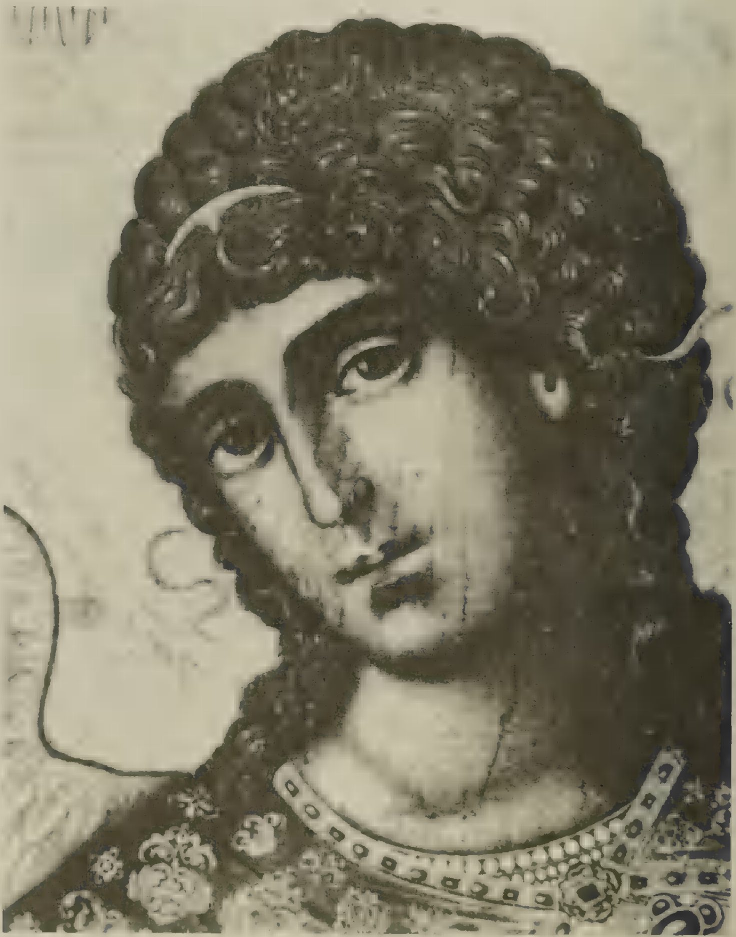

Fig. 59
The Archangel Gabriel:
Simon Ouchakov, New Convent, Moscow.

naturalistic art, we only see this process of reduction; iconography has unfortunately also been influenced by such art (18) in which the light of the Transfiguration gives place to natural light. This natural light subordinates all the elements of the representation to its own law in order to express them within the natural order. The transcendental dimension thus disappears, and the image becomes an illusion of reality, a false and fictional reality. Having been enclosed in the natural and fallen world, the icon not only loses its spiritual character but also its artistic value.

As for the technical question which seeks to make clear where and how artists worked light into their paintings, we will perhaps never find an adequate and detailed answer. There have not been any really satisfying studies done on this point nor do we have historical sources which could give us concrete rules that were used by the iconographers in their actual work.

The solution, however, can be found in the very dynamics of the icon. When everything that is painted in the icon moves out toward the spectator, the light must naturally follow this movement; it also must underscore the movements inside the composition. Thus the reflections on the folds of the garments, the mountains, and the buildings will naturally have to advance toward us also, but these reflections serve rather to balance the color backgrounds, to underline the movement of a gesture. What is essential is that the world be transfigured. Concerning the subject of light and the divine light, more than elsewhere, we discover how much man's language is surpassed and how much his artistic means and techniques are impoverished. Nonetheless, is not the most beautiful work that an artist can accomplish to be found in making God's light shine on his creatures?

18. See figure 59; we can already see this procedure in the work of Simon *Ochakov* who still painted according to the ancient tradition.

SECTION III
THE TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF ICONS

O Lord, and Divine Master of all that exists, enlighten your servant, and direct my soul, heart, and mind. Guide my hands so that I may worthily and perfectly represent your image as well as those of your holy Mother and all the saints, for the glory, joy, and beautification of your holy church.

prayer recited by iconographers before beginning their work.)

Chapter 12

Technical Preparations

Introduction

The icon is certainly a reflection of the Beyond, a presence of the Supreme Mystery. But, if the icon is to fulfill this high calling, no detail should be neglected, in either the choice of materials or the execution of the actual work. Even though it is true that the technical aspect of the icon, the "how-to" of production, is not of its essence, it is still important and must not be underestimated.

The Board

Above all, the board must allow for an adequate preservation of the painting since it literally supports and undergirds the icon. Most of the masterpieces that we have in our museums have been preserved thanks to the quality of the board, and this despite the often disasterous atmospheric conditions in medieval churches. The choice of wood is therefore very important. Non-resinous woods are preferable because they are more homogeneous. They warp less and allow the canvas or cloth to be glued on more easily. In different regions, painters have used various kinds of wood for icons. In Mediterranean countries, the choice fell on cypresswood which was preferred for its "Church smell" but which also had the disadvantage of producing tiny cracks. Platan (sycamore), oak, and palmwood were also used. In Russia and in the Balkan countries, linden (also known as basswood), birch, oak, ash, and beech were preferred. In the North, fir was also used, despite its resinous fibers.

Boards were cut from the trunk of the tree at the thickest point after the trunk had been split with an ax along the grain. The boards were taken from the section closest to the center so as to give them the greatest solidity and strength.

The boards were dried for months then dunked in water at about 50 C to eliminate any albumin which worked against the preservation of the wood. After being dried once again, the boards were imbued with mercury chloride to destroy parasites.

Today's masters also use plywood and pressed wood since boards made from the woods used in the Middle Ages are difficult to find. What is more, these sheets of wood allow the artist to cut very large pieces. In the past, it was necessary to glue several parallel planks together and then glue these planks onto a frame. The frame assured the stability of the whole. It is no longer necessary to glue boards together as was done in earlier times.

The Frame

The iconographer's job is to interpret a subject that has already been determined by Tradition. The essentials of the drawing along with its proportions have been fixed in advance. We take the board and set it so that the grain runs vertically. The dimensions of the surface to be painted are defined by the frame or edge which is an integral part of the icon.

The width of the frame makes it possible to modify the proportions of the surface to be painted. There are three possibilities for the formation of a frame (figure 60):

1) The edges of the four sides are the same width. The proportions between the interior surface and the frame thus remain the same.

2) The lower edge of the frame is wider. The interior surface of the icon thus becomes proportionally wider.

3) The upper and lower edges are wider; as a result, the interior surface almost forms a square.

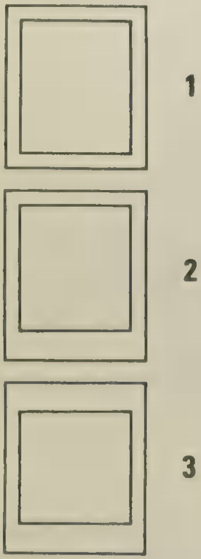

Fig. 60

The frame must be set on the side of the board which is toward the center of the trunk. During the drying process, and for years after, the rings in the wood spread out and produce the warping (1) that can be observed in ancient icons. (figure 61) The board's hollowed out interior surface is called *kovtcheg* in Slavonic. In the Slavonic Bible, this name designates the Ark of the Covenant, and later on, it was used to designate a reliquary. We thus have an expression of the

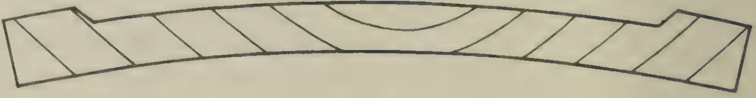

Fig. 61

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1. M.E. Archangelski, "The Reasons for the Deformation of Wooden Supports for Painting," *Soobctcenia, no. 28, (1972), Edition VNZILKR, Moscow.*

link between the veneration of relics and icons. The frame, *pole*, does not have the same function as a frame found on a modern painting where it encircles the painting and thus is distinguished from it. The frame on an icon often has inscriptions and prayers on it. On icons that illustrate a saint's life, the frame is often covered with numerous scenes.

It is a difficult task to hollow out the interior surface of an icon because the surface must be smooth and of uniform depth. To obtain a uniform surface, painters used a drawknife.

The depth of the surface could vary between 2 mm. (.07874 in.) and 5 mm. (.19685 in.) but could be as much as 10 (.3937 in.). During the actual painting of the icon, the frame also allows the painter to put a ruler over the surface to support his hand.

These raised frames are rare in Greek icons but became the norm in Russia from the 12th to the 18th centuries. As we have mentioned, the frames were sometimes enlarged to as much as 15 cm. (5.9055 in.) to accomodate inscriptions or scenes from the life of the saint represented in the center. In addition, in the Strogonov School, the exterior edges were sometimes raised a second time to obtain two levels of depth.

Today, we can glue strips of plywood, 5 mm. (.19685 in.) maximum thickness, onto plywood or pressed wood boards. The inner edges of these strips should be cut on an angle. (figure 62)

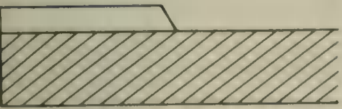


Fig. 62

This procedure is simpler and less costly than hollowing our the surface. The strips of plywood must be fastened onto the board so they do not pull up and come loose when hot glue is applied and makes the wood expand, especially when the canvas is glued on.

The Braces

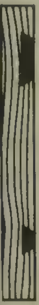


Fig. 64

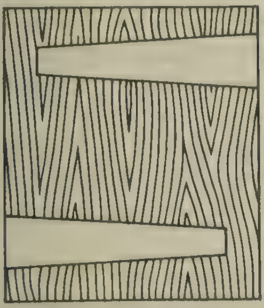


Fig. 63

Once the board is cut to the desired dimensions, it is useful to put two braces or wedges on the back. These braces should be of a harder wood than that of the board (figure 63) and have the form of an elongated trapezoid which naturally corresponds to the form dug out on the back of the board. The braces are wider inside the board that at the surface so they will perfectly adhere to the board. (figure 64)

Yet another form has been employed since the 18th century; two laths, or narrow strips of wood, are inserted into the thickness of the board, at its upper and lower edges. (figure 65) The thickness of the braces must not exceed one half of the thickness of the board.

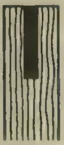


Fig. 65

The Glue

The best glue is fish glue, but other less expensive glues give equally good results: skin glue, bone glue, carpenter's glue, and others. To prepare the glue, add 1.5 glasses of water to 100 gm. (.22046 lb.) of powder or chunks. Allow the mixture to expand overnight, and then bring it to a boil two or three times. It is advisable to pass the glue through a strainer to remove all the impurities. Note: rabbit skin glue should be boiled only once just before it is is used.

Glue that is insufficiently boiled is not solid enough and can cause cracks. Glue that is over-cooked looses its strength.

The best glue that is presently on the market is skin glue. It is chestnut-color, expands in cold water, and dissolves in hot water. Once prepared, it changes color and becomes sunflower yellow.

Our fish glue is weaker than the sturgeon glue used in Russia. Gelatin, or sheepskin glue, is a substitute for other glues but is more expensive. Once it is prepared, it decomposes quickly.

The Fabric

In order to make the fabric adhere to the wood that it covers, score a network of diagonal lines on the inside surface of the icon. The lines should be spaced from 1 to 3 cm. (.3937 to 1.1811 in.) apart.

Using a wide brush, the board is then covered with a very diluted solution of glue. After letting the board dry completely, spread on a second layer of more concentrated glue. To keep the wood from warping too much, the back of the board can also be covered with glue. This is necessary if the board is thin or made of plywood. The wood is thus more resistant to humidity.

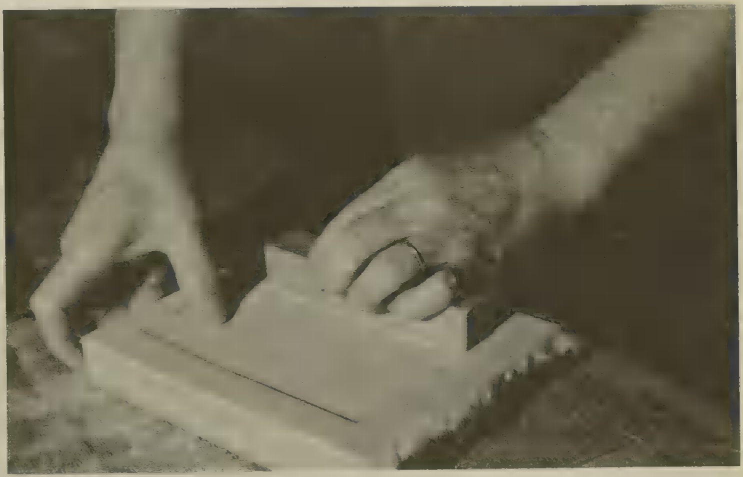
On ancient icons, we rarely find a fabric between the wood and the gesso ground, *levkas*. This ground was put directly onto the wood. The fabric only appeared toward the end of the 14th century.

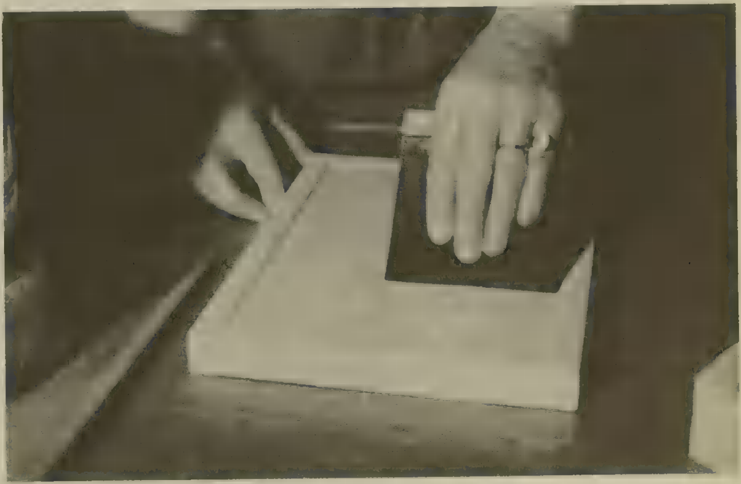
When the wood warps, cracks appear first of all on the white gesso ground which then begins to peel and fall off. This is what has happened to many very old icons. If the white ground is put onto a fabric, the two thus form one uniform and resistant layer.

For the fabric, painters used rare and rather thin cloth. A thick fabric does not adhere as well to the wood, and it may come loose due to the internal tension in the wood. Today, artists can use thin cloth or tarlatan-muslin which is used to line clothes.

Cut a piece of fabric somewhat bigger than the board. After having removed the bits and fibers of wood that might have been raised up by the preceding application of glue, cover the board with a thick layer of very hot glue, using a wide brush. Soak the fabric in this glue, lightly wring it out, and then place it on the board. Using your fingers, rub the fabric in all directions. This eliminates air pockets and pushes the fabric into the corners. If the icon is too big, cover the wood with glue in several stages and then apply the dampened fabric. Allow the icon to dry for one day.

You can also apply the fabric dry without soaking it. It should, however, be immediately covered with hot glue using a brush. Once the icon is very dry and after having cut off any fabric that goes beyond the surface of the icon, cover the whole surface with hot glue mixed with water and a little gesso. The icon is now ready for the application of the white gesso ground, *levkas*.





The *Levkas*, Gesso

The preparation of the *levkas*, or gesso ground, requires great care and experience. The gesso is, in fact, the link between the wood and the paint. The solidity of the icon depends on its quality. At the same time, the gesso must separate the layer of paint from the wood support. It must also be solid, homogeneous, and smooth on the surface. The name *levkas* comes from the Greek, *levkos* which simply means "white". The technique itself was developed in Byzantium. The gesso foundation is made with a fine alabaster powder. Later on, artists also used chalk, but this is less solid and has some disadvantages, especially if gilding is later applied. You can recognize freshly-burned alabaster by the fact that it sticks to your fingers. The older it is, the drier it becomes. In Russia, artists used a good quality, "washed" chalk which corresponds to Spanish or Meudon gesso, as it is commercially known, in fine powder or small pieces.

To prepare the gesso, pour some hot rabbit skin glue into a container and add the white powder mixing the two together with a wooden spoon until there is a thick liquid having the consistency of fresh cream.

Another method is to put 100 gm. (.22046 lb.) of skin glue into 1 L. (1.0567 qt.) of water. The glue will then expand. Bring the solution to a boil twice and remove it from the fire. Add 1 kg. (2.2046 lb.) of the white powder and stir until the solution is well mixed and smooth. Then add 5 to 8 drops of oil and again stir the mixture well. The oil gives the gesso a smoother and less porous surface.

Using a wide brush, cover the icon board with the liquid gesso. Apply this product with a wide knife or metal applicator used for plastering in order to obtain a uniform surface. Allow the gesso ground to dry for one day. Before putting on a second layer, rub the surface with fine sandpaper or with a wet pumice stone. Clean it, especially to remove any crystals of the sandpaper. For the second layer, reheat the gesso on top of a double-boiler adding water to reduce the strength of the glue. The lower layer is thus always stronger than the following one. If the procedure is reversed, having the weaker layers on the bottom, cracks will form and the foundation will separate from the board. Using a wet pumice stone, rub the surface in all directions. The gesso that is removed by rubbing forms a white liquid with the water and can be wiped off with a sponge. After putting on 3 to 5 layers, the surface should be completely smooth. This can be checked by running the palm of your hand over it. Allow the icon to dry for a day.

Instead of using a wet pumice stone to make the surface uniform and smooth, you can also use a wide putty or plaster knife to equalize the surface covered with hot gesso. By repeating the operation twice, always letting the icon dry completely between each application, you obtain a smooth surface.

The final polishing is done with fine sandpaper, double or triple zero (in the USA, 320, 400, or 600 grade sandpaper, then an emery cloth). The ancient masters used to spread out the last layer of gesso with the palm of their hands, rubbing it for 10 to 15 minutes. The surface should now be uniform and mat, not shiny. Special attention must be given to those sections used for the faces and the halos; they must be nearly perfect.

Drawing The Icon

The drawing of the icon is of great importance because it gives structure and movement to the icon and determines the surfaces to be painted. The ancient iconographers religiously kept the sketches of their icons so they could use them again in their later works. These collections of designs were called *podlinik*, pattern books of authentic drawings, since the iconographer's job was to depict subjects already fixed by Tradition. The oldest pattern books that have come down to us are the ones belonging to the Stroganov family, beginning of the 17th century, and the one from Sia, end of the 17th century. Nonetheless, such books probably existed already in the 9th century in the Byzantine empire and were called "hermeneia," meaning simply "interpretation" in Greek. According to A. Xyngopoulos (2), pattern books developed from the "synaxarion" in which were found detailed descriptions of the saints and their lives.

In fact, Epiphane Premoudri told the story about Theophane the Greek (1368-1404, Russia) who during his work did not look at his sketches as the other painters were always doing.

Modern research on the icons of the great masters has shown the existence of some very elaborate geometric structures as well as a profound knowledge of proportions, on the part of the painters: between the measurements of the icon and the dimensions of the halo, between the size of the head and the bodies. The iconographer profoundly knew his subject and its details as well as the canon of forms created by Byzantine painting throughout the centuries. Using these geometric structures and a lead pencil, a silverpoint, a brush, coal, or charcoal, he was thus able to draw a new interpreta-

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2. *Andreas Xyngopoulos, "Icons," Byzantine Art,* (1954) Athens, p. 229.

tion of a well known work.

For those who do not have this knowledge of iconography, or beginners, it is preferable to use the procedures known by the ancient iconographers, and still used today.

The simplest thing is to reproduce an icon at the same scale as the original. Put a piece of paper on top of an existing pattern or drawing and, using a pencil, trace it onto the paper. Then turn the paper over and sketch the same drawing on the other side. Put the good side of the paper on top of the board and redraw the pattern. The black coloring of the pencil will thus be transferred to the gesso and the pattern will appear in all its detail.

The black markings of the drawing on the gesso surface will disappear as the icon is covered with layers of color. The only thing left is to add the contours of the colored surfaces. Through their long experience, the ancient masters knew perfectly the details, the structure of the face, the movement of the folds in the clothing, the rocks, etc., and they were able to complete these details with freehand drawings. Artists with less talent used another technique for conserving the pattern. With a dry point, that is a needle, they engraved the patterns onto the gesso surface by punching little holes in the surface through the paper pattern. The holes are thus still visible after several layers of paint. This engraving is called "graphia." It is rarely found on ancient icons or only for a part, such as for the halo or the face. From the 15th century on, this procedure appears more often, and it became the accepted practice in the 17th century.

The ancient painters used still another technique to transfer their patterns onto the board. They first perforated the pattern drawing with a needle and then placed it on top of the icon. They then put some coal, charcoal, or a dark pigment, such as red ochre, into a piece of thin cloth, making a little sack. With this pounce bag, they rapidly pounced the paper which had been securely attached to the board. The fine powder passed through the holes in the paper and reproduced the pattern on the gesso.

An accomplished artist was able to make a freehand enlargement or reduction of the pattern with the help of geometric structures. (See chapter 6) For the beginner, it is advisable to draw vertical and horizontal lines on the copied drawing. The distances between these lines can be increased or diminished according to the measurements of the icon to be painted. We thus obtain a grid on which to reproduce the pattern. This procedure is called "squaring off the drawing."

Gilding

Before gilding, carefully clean the icon so that no dust remains. The ancient masters even went so far as to water down the floors of their workshops to avoid raising any dust during this delicate work. Cover the surfaces to be gilded (halos, backgrounds, and strips) with a liquid layer of red or yellow ochre. When the parts have dried completely, lightly polish them with your finger and put two or three coats of white shellac cut with denatured alcohol (French polish) in order to obtain a very smooth and uniform surface and to keep the varnish from being absorbed by the gesso ground.

Gilding with Oil

This is the simplest technique. Cover the prepared areas with a thin layer of gold varnish (Sennelier) or "mixture." On ancient icons, painters used a mordant (fixative agent) such as a compound of linseed oil with a siccative (drying agent) and varnish. Depending on the composition, this varnish dried in 6 to 24 hours. The layer of mixture will dry in 10 hours.

When this layer is nearly dry, so it does not stick to your fingers, put on the gold leaf. Commercial gold leaf is sold in two forms in small packets of 25 sheets: backed and non-backed. The backed gold leaf is preferable because its sheets, 8 cm. (3.1496 in.) square, are lightly glued with diluted eggwhite onto paper-backing. Thus they are easily handled, and the loss of gold is minimized. When the areas to be gilded are completely covered, let everything dry for several hours. Then remove the remaining pieces of gold with a soft brush and keep them in a container so that later on they can be made into gold powder. The drying of the gold may take several days. To finish things off, clean the borders of the gilded areas with a pointed knife. You can cover the gold with cut white shellac (French polish) so as to prevent the varnish, which will be put on the finished icon, from detaching pieces of the gold.

Water Gilding on a Bole Ground

Bole, or clay, makes it possible to burnish the gold and obtain a highly polished surface. The material substance for this ground is sold under the name of "gilding base" *(assiette à dorer)* or bole which is a mixture of red-orange colors or Sienna earth with white and a small amount of grease. The hard lumps must be pulverized with a knife so as to obtain a fine powder. As a binding agent, use an eggwhite emulsion, that is, a mixture of ⅔ eggwhite and ⅓ water. Allow the mixture to decompose in a very tightly capped bottle for 2 to 4 days. Next filter the liquid through a cloth and add the powder of the gilding base (bole) until you get a liquid color. Using this colored liquid, cover all the areas to be gilded several times.

Let dry for 20 minutes and then rub with a clean cloth. Tap the areas thus painted with the wooden end of a brush. When you hear a normal sound, you can be sure that everything is properly dry. If the sound is not uniform, allow for more drying. Applying the gold is very difficult and requires a great deal of experience. The gold leaf must be put on a velvet cushion so it can be cut into pieces. Use a very wide, special brush; run it through your hair several times to put an electrical charge on it, and then use it to attract the gold leaf. Due to the extreme fragility of the gold leaf, all work must be done in a closed room because the slightest draft will blow the gold away. Provisionally apply the gold by passing over the prepared areas with a fine, wet brush. The gold leaf thus lightly attaches itself onto the surface. When all the areas to be gilded are covered, prepare a mixture of ⅔ alcohol, ⅓ water, and several drops of the eggwhite emulsion. Incline the board a little and apply a small amount of this liquid on the upper edge of the gilded areas so that it runs down. The liquid spreads out quickly between the gold and the bole ground and unites the two layers. 30 minutes is sufficient for the gold to dry. Once again tap the surface to make sure of the quality of the sound. Finally, burnish using an agate or a tooth. Rub from the center outward towards the edges. The result should be a uniform and shiny surface. However, the gilding base, the bole, must not be too dry or else the gold will not adhere perfectly.

Gold Powder

Never use a bronze and gold alloy on icons, even though this substance is sold cheaply in stores. Pure gold can be obtained in drop form or as thin bars. There is also yellow, red, or lemon gold according to the number of carats.

With what remains of the gold leaf, you can make gold powder. Put the gold in a bowl with some water. By rubbing the mixture with your finger, the leaf turns into a powder. Add a few drops of gum Arabic and mix well. Let the mixture sit for 30 minutes, and the gold will fall to the bottom. Very carefully remove the water and heat the gold powder to dry it. What is left is a substance that can be used as paint.

Gilding after Varnishing

This technique is universally used for the restoration of old icons. The whole icon, except the areas to be gilded, is covered with a layer of gesso diluted with water. When the surface is completely dry, apply a layer of gilding varnish on the damaged areas and continue the same procedure as described for gilding with oil. After drying completely, remove the gesso by washing it off with a brush and cover the whole icon again with "olifa" or with varnish. (See chapter 13, section VI, Varnishing)

The Colors

The surprisingly brilliant coloring in the masterpieces of Greek and Russian iconographers proves that the ancient masters knew perfectly well the chemical properties and tolerances of different colors.

For centuries, the choice of colors was left to the painter. In fact, we can even distinguish different schools on the basis of the range of their colors. Even within one period, we can distinguish different painters on the basis of their preferred colors: for example, 1) Theophane the Greek, Daniel Tchiorny and Andrei Rublev, and 2) Dionysius and the Tsar's school in Moscow. This difference is even more apparent if we compare various countries under Byzantine influence, within a given period.

Colors must be resistant to light, retain their brilliance, and mix well. They must unite well with the gesso foundation without changing or reacting with the binding substances. Certain colors "cover" well, due to their chemical composition. Others are naturally more or less transparent. In general, we can say that the finer the crystaline structure of the color, the better it covers; the more nearly uniform this structure, the more the color shines. The crystals do not exceed 1/1000 mm. This crystaline structure was known by the ancient masters. In laboratories in Moscow, scientists have discovered under microscopic examination that the colors used for the faces on icons have the finest crystals. Those colors on the clothing have larger crystals in the form of sticks or rods.

Today, we divide pigments into two natural groups: 1) mineral colors and 2) organic colors.

Mineral Colors

These colors are found in nature or are industrial products, "imitations." They are composed of salts (carbonates, chromates, and silicates) or of different metal oxides. Another group is made up of metallic hydrates.

The stability of these colors depends on the stability of the chemical combinations which gave them birth, that is the nature of their constituent elements. Thus, the combination of oxygen with a metal (iron, chromium, and zinc) is stable when it is saturated. An oversaturated combination, however, has always had a tendency to change into a saturated combination. This is what happens when a mixture of two pigments changes its shade. This is a frequent phenomenon, for example in mixtures that contain a copper-based color. This can also happen under the influence of varnishes, air, radiation, and especially light.

Organic Colors

Natural organic colors are found in vegetable and animal substances. To produce a powdery colored pigment, natural colorants must be combined with a colorless mineral substance. This procedure was already known in antiquity. These powders are called "lacquers," in Russian *bacany*. Most of these colors change under the influence of light.

By using natural hydrocarbons, modern industry has created colorants with an organic color base. It has also obtained equivalent colors by using other elements . Their ability to resist change caused by light depends on the basic chemical group, but their resistance quality is not always perfect.

The fact that these colors are produced in numerous factories and often under different names makes it even more difficult to really know their properties.

Pigments

To make it easier to use the following chart, the pigments are classified by their colors instead of their chemical families. This list is far from being exhaustive, but it sets out the colors used by the ancient iconographers as well as some of their modern equivalents. In addition, they are powders that can easily be bought in specialty stores. (3)

White

1. MEUDON WHITE, WHITING (SPANISH WHITE): natural calcium carbonate. Used especially for backgrounds and frescoes. These colors are solid, opaque in the light, cover well, and mix well with all colors.

2. PLASTER: calcium sulfate (gypsum, plaster of Paris). It cannot be used for paint since it does not cover at all. It was used during the first centuries for backgrounds. It resists temperature and humidity changes very well.

3. WHITE LEAD, WHITE SILVER: lead hydrocarbonate or ceruse (Greek: *psimithion*, Latin: *cerusa*). This color covers well, gives solid layers, and is very bright. It is a violent poison, turns black on being exposed to the air, and yellows in emulsions. It is best not to use it.

4. ZINC WHITE: zinc oxide. It does not cover well but is good for scumbling. Stable. Mixed with titanium white, it

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3. Sennelier, Lefranc, Adam... (These are European suppliers. translator)

gives all the degrees of transparency; this is important for white touches, or lights, in iconography. It does not change in light.

5. TITANIUM WHITE: titanium dioxide. It has been known since 1920; it covers well and is very bright. Stable unless mixed with cadmium, cobalt, or ultramarine.

6. PERMANENT WHITE: pure barium sulfate. Very stable in mixtures, it can be used for all techniques.

7. LITHOPONE: zinc sulfide. It has been known for 50 years. Recent products no longer turn black as before. Unstable in mixtures. Should only be used for decoration.

Yellow

1. NAPLES YELLOW (NATURAL): variable chemical compositions of lead oxide and antimony oxide. Toxic. Covers very well. Avoid contact with iron, a knife for example. Resists changes in light. Unstable mixture with ultramarine. Commercial imitations are also available.

2. CADMIUM YELLOW: cadmium sulfide. The brighter it is, the less stable it is. Since it contains 22% sulfur, it is unstable in mixtures with ochres, ultramarine, and ivory-black. Avoid contact with copper; this substance is very expensive.

3. INDIAN YELLOW: imported from India. Solid but does not cover well. Much like the hot yellow shade of the organic product.

4. CHROMIUM YELLOW: lead chromate. Covers well, toxic, and moderately priced. Becomes green in the light.

5. ZINC YELLOW, LEMON YELLOW, BUTTERCUP YELLOW: zinc chromates. Cover well and more stable than chromium yellow. Intense shade but become slightly green in the light.

6. BARYTA YELLOW, STRONTIA YELLOW: combinations of chromium with baryta and strontia. Mixtures of chromium colors with white lead, Naples yellow, ultramarine, and cobalts are not stable.

Ochre and Red

1. YELLOW OCHRE, RED OCHRE: combinations of clayey earth with iron oxide. Volcanic origin. Ochres are found in many countries in very diverse shades, from bright to dark yellow. In mixtures with other colors, many varieties of stable shades are formed. These are the most important pigments for iconography.

2. MARS YELLOW: Artificial ochres called "iron oxides" or ochres of a darker shade and golden in color (Mars yellow) are commercially available. Mars yellow contains plaster and

is more transparent. It changes greatly under the influence of varnish.

3. ENGLISH RED, POMPEII RED, SPANISH RED, PUZZUOLI EARTH, RED BOLE: The different proportions of iron in ochres give them a wide variety of red shades. They all have a very strong coloration.

4. SIENNA (NATURAL): from the place name of its origin, Sienna in Tuscany, Italy. The dark shades of these ochres are due to a certain proportion of silicate contained in them. They do not cover well and change greatly underneath varnish .

5. BURNT SIENNA: a pigment of a dark chestnut red. It covers better than natural Sienna and can be mixed with any color. This gives it its great richness of shades.

6. UMBER: variable shades according to the proportion of iron and manganese oxides in the clayey earth. Stable and mixes well. Hotter shades when burnt.

7. CAPUT MORTUUM: an artificial pigment of iron oxides which give it a dark red color close to violet. Stable and covers well. Can contain acids if not well washed.

8. CHINESE VERMILION: mercury sulfide. A very ancient pigment known to the Greeks *(miltos)* and Romans *(minium)*. The best variety comes from China where it was greatly appreciated. Artificial Chinese vermilion was already being produced in the Middle Ages. Pliny the Elder (1st century B.C.) noted that it turned black in direct light. The same thing happens under the influence of vegetable oils and varnishes. This process can be limited by covering the layer of color with gelatin or a binding agent.

9. FRENCH VERMILION (IMITATION): Chinese vermilion is today replaced by the rich variety of cadmiums or its imitations.

10. CADMIUM REDS (NATURAL AND IMITATION): combination of sulfo-selenide and cadmium. The red shade is determined by the proportion of spar contained in it. Very bright and stable but costly. Good results are also obtained with imitation cadmiums (solid azoic coloring dye).

11. MADDER LACQUER, ROSE, GOLDEN, PURPLE, INTENSE: a dye (alizarin) taken from the roots of the madden plant (Italy, Cyprus, and Provence) which contains still other coloring agents (purple, yellow, and brownish green). The pigment is obtained by staining a clayey chalk.

12. ALIZARIN LACQUER: Today, alizarin is synthetically produced and possesses the same qualities. Stable in the light, it can be used with all techniques and allows for good scumbling by keeping all its intensity. Requires a great deal of binding agent since it reacts strangely in water.

13. HELIOS RED: a solid azoic dye. Apparently good results. Recent color.

Blue

1. ULTRAMARINE: a compound of soda silicate and alumina (not yet completely analysed). The ancient masters produced it by crushing lapis lazuli. There exists today a high quality synthetic product, stable in light, non toxic, and inexpensive. The shades go from purplish-blue to bright blue green. The mixtures with titanium white, Naples yellow, and cadmium yellow are not stable. Avoid contact with acids.

2. COBALT BLUE: a compound of cobalt aluminate and clayey earth. A beautiful cold blue. Stable in light, good for scumbling, and covers sufficiently. It changes quite a bit under the influence of varnishes. Rather expensive.

3. TRUE CERULEAN BLUE: cobalt stannate. Bright greenish blue. Can be used for all techniques but expensive. Requires a lot of binding agent.

4. IMITATION CERULEAN BLUE: a less intense shade but stable and less expensive.

5. PRUSSIAN BLUE, BERLIN BLUE, PARIS BLUE, MILORI BLUE: ferric ferrocyanide. A very intense pigment discovered in the 18th century. The different names come from the way it is manufactured; the purest blue is called Paris blue. Mixtures with Chinese vermilion and lead white are not stable. Avoid contact with alkalis (basses) and with madden lacquer. Mixtures with chromium yellow give intense greens. These blues do not take well to water and so some alcohol must be used to wet them. They require a great deal of binding agent and are to be used after being mixed.

Green

1. CHROMIUM GREEN: anhydrous chromium oxide. An intense, hot shade. Stable and covers well.

2. TRUE EMERALD GREEN: hydrated chromium oxide. Does not cover well; better for scumbling. Mixes well.

3. IMITATION EMERALD GREEN: phtalocyanine on copper.

4. PERMANENT GREEN: mixture of two colors of different origins: Paris blue with chromium yellow and emerald green with zinc yellow.

5. TRUE COBALT GREEN: zinc oxide and cobalt oxide. Covers sufficiently well but requires a lot of binding agent. Transparent in darker shades. Stable.

6. GREEN EARTH, VERONA EARTH, BOHEMIAN EARTH: products caused by the decomposition of such rocks as basalt and melaphyre (Cyprus, Italy, and Czechoslovakia). Used since antiquity. The best is Verona earth. Requires lots of binding agent and, in egg tempera, it is difficult to use in a pure state. It covers poorly but serves to

harmonize shades.

7. DARK AND BRIGHT ENGLISH GREEN: lead chromate, ferrous ferrocyanide. Compounded colors whose stability depends on the base colors.

8.TRUE VERONESE GREEN: Best not to use it despite its intensity, toxic. Can turn black and changes in mixtures with organic colors.

9.IMITATION VERONESE GREEN: azoic dye. Eliminates the disadvantages of no. 8. Rather solid.

Violet

1.TRUE DARK COBALT VIOLET: cobalt phosphate. It offers all the qualities of cobalts for all techniques. Toxic and expensive.

2. MINERAL VIOLET: manganese phosphate. Less expensive but opinions are divided on its qualities.

Black

1. VINE BLACK: obtained by burning vine branches. Stable and good for all techniques. Mixes poorly because of its very light specific weight. For wetting, add some alcohol. Mixed with whites, it gives bluish shades.

2. IVORY BLACK: produced in ancient times by burning real ivory. Mixed with white, it gives pearly shades.

3. BONE BLACK: obtained by burning bones. Mixed with whites, it gives grayish brown shades.

All black colors require a lot of binding agent, lots of oil (olifa). Whether mixed or pure, they easily thicken. Mixtures with cadmiums are not stable.

For a simple palette, the following colors are sufficient: titanium white, zinc white, zinc yellow, yellow ochre, red ochre, burnt Sienna, imitation red cadmium, chromium green, ultramarine blue, Prussian blue, and ivory black.

Egg Tempera

Egg tempera spread from Byzantium to Europe in the 15th century. In Italy, it was called “tempera” (a word which designates any substance which binds color). With the advance of oil painting in the 17th century, egg tempera lost its importance. It held its own until the 19th century only in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Russia.

By its composition (51% water, 15% albumen, 22% fatty matter, and 12% other substances), the egg yolk can form a stable emulsion when diluted in water. In order to avoid its decomposition, it is necessary to add an acid, vinegar for example. This emulsion gives the pigments a rich coloration.

After drying, it forms a uniform layer and bonds well with the gesso. Through the action of the olifa (icon varnish), the layers become transparent and allow the lower layers to show through. They combine together to produce scumbling, the typical shading off of colors associated with icons. In addition, egg yolk helps colors keep their brilliance and resist the fading action of light.

This technique, however, presents some difficulties. The layers are rapidly absorbed by the ground and dry quickly. The artist must therefore work quickly. In order to maintain a certain degree of wetness, the artist can add layers of diluted egg yolk. When the layers are dry, the colors become brighter. If the emulsion is too weak, the colors may be removed during subsequent work. If, on the other hand, the emulsion is too concentrated, there is the possibility of cracks, and colors may flake off. The proportion of emulsion to use is governed by the nature of the colors. Ochres and Sienna, for example, require much more than the other colors. Here are the rules to follow:

1. The color obtained after being mixed with the emulsion must be of the same liquid consistency as water, but it must cover well.
2. It is better to put less emulsion than to put too much.
3. After drying, the layer must be mat but solid.

It is absolutely necessary to mix the powder well with water, until a thick paste is obtained. The ancient masters used to grind colors with their fingers in the palm of their hands or on a rough board. This procedure required lots of time. In our day, thanks to specialized machines in factories, powders already have a fine structure, and this makes the work of the painter much easier. Fresh colors must always be used, never dried out colors.

The preparation of the egg yolk is done in the following way. Pierce a small hole in the rounded end of the egg through which the egg white can run out. Or else, the egg can be broken and the yolk caught in one of the halves of the shell. Then the yolk should be gently rinsed with cold water under the faucet while holding it in the hand. Finally break the skin and the yellow will follow out. Then mix it with 1/3 volume of vinegar. This mixture will preserve the yolk better. In the Middle Ages, painters used fig juice in Italy, beer in Germany and kvas in Russia. The emulsion obtained is then added to the colors which have already been ground well with water.

Industrial tempera colors do not have the same quality since foreign substances are added as preservatives.

Chapter 13

Painting The Icon The First Layers Of Paint

The First Layers Of Paint *(Otkrytie Ikony)*

Before starting to paint, prepare the colors by adding water (for some, add alcohol) so as to obtain a smooth paste with no lumps. P. Feodoroff uses a wooden spoon for each color; others put some powder in the palm of their hands, using a wet brush, and mix it there, as was done in previous centuries. The emulsion can even be added at this time. To obtain greater quantities of paint, it is preferable to grind the powders in a jar using a brush. The resulting paste can be preserved for a long time in a tightly closed container and used later by simply adding some emulsion. For a palette, use a plate or else a commercially sold plastic palette.

To paint the different surfaces, choose colors of a darker shade than the color of the model to be reproduced because it is by the process of highlighting that the light of the faces, clothes, and other details will shine out. If you are a beginner, be sure to choose a beautiful model, well preserved, and rather simple; it will be easier to reproduce. Up until the 16th century, the background colors were rather bright; then they became darker and darker to conform to the taste of the times which appreciated this element for its decorative value. It is advisable to respect the range of colors on the model: note, however, that each age has had a different range.

The technique of painting an icon is different from oil painting. If you are using oils on a canvas, the color is spread on in a thin layer because the canvas is upright. If you are painting on paper, the layer of oil paint is thin because of the paper's fragility. On an icon, however, color is applied to the surface with a brush within the limits of the drawing so as to form a small pool of fairly liquid color. It is absolutely necessary to have top quality brushes, preferably of sable hair which has the advantage of being rather supple and stands up straight to form a good point. The brush should be completely soaked with paint so that the color flows on well. Some of the water in the paint solution is absorbed by the gesso ground (levkas) of the icon, and the rest evaporates. The entire area must be covered with color including the engraved lines of the drawing, those cut into the foundation.

In this way, all the areas of the icon are covered so that there are no white spaces left. When everything is very dry, the layer of paint should be uniform, mat, and solid. In order to insure that the paint adheres to the ground in the most effective way, you can cover each part separately with diluted egg yolk. After drying, repeat the operation until all the areas are uniform. It is very necessary to know the properties of the pigments, to know whether they cover well or not, if they form deposits, and if they need a lot of binding agent or not very much.

The beginner sometimes notices that deposits and thichnesses are formed. When this happens, the color is not liquid enough. Allow everything to dry, then scrape off the thicknesses with a knife and start over.

The building up of one color on another is important for obtaining good expression. We thus get deep, intense colors on which touches of white are then painted to obtain the specific coloring that gives the icon its mysterious quality.

Precision Work, Excluding Skin Tones (*Dolichoe*)

The following step gives the icon its precision and luminosity. With a fine brush, draw the lines of each colored area, each time using a darker color than the one used before; be sure, however, that each shade remains within the color range of the area. In the 17th century, artists also used a dark color (black or red), called "eksedra," to redraw the design on top of all the colors. To give shape to the details as well as to obtain the desired light effect, there are two possibilities:

A. Paint on the touches of white by adding white to the color. The bright color thus obtained is painted on the area to be highlighted. Immediately put some very diluted egg yolk onto all the area to be highlighted. The brighter color should melt into the first small pool of emulsion. Then bring the brighter color back toward the place which will be the center of brightness and diminish the intensity toward the darker areas. Continue by small steps but work quickly to avoid deposits.

The beginner must follow an authentic ancient icon in all its details; in fact, in an icon, there are no sources of natural light which would shine light on the same side of all objects, that is, which would cast shadows. Equally, the interior light is not seen everywhere. It is thus difficult to establish rules. In the section on icon aesthetics, we tried to set out some principles about the light in icons.

After letting the icon dry for a long time, cover the highlighted areas with a thin layer of emulsion; this fixes the colors. Let everything dry again. Repeat the operation 4 times, each time adding a little more white and decreasing the size of the areas of highlighting around the center of brightness. Finally, the last touches of white are drawn with fine hatching lines using a bright color, often pure white. The only thing left to do is to redraw the lines on top. This highlighting procedure is called *probelka* in Russian.

When the highlighting process is carried out by mixing white with the local color, that is the color of the first layer, it is called "single reflection." In certain Byzantine icons and especially in those of the Novgorodian School, there is what we call a "two-color reflection." To highlight according to this procedure, use a color complementary to the local color put on the gesso: for example, to a red background, add touches of a blue green shade; to a blue background, add shades that go from bright violet to rose. The effect of "two-color" reflection," which is due to polychromy, give a permanent vivacity to icons.

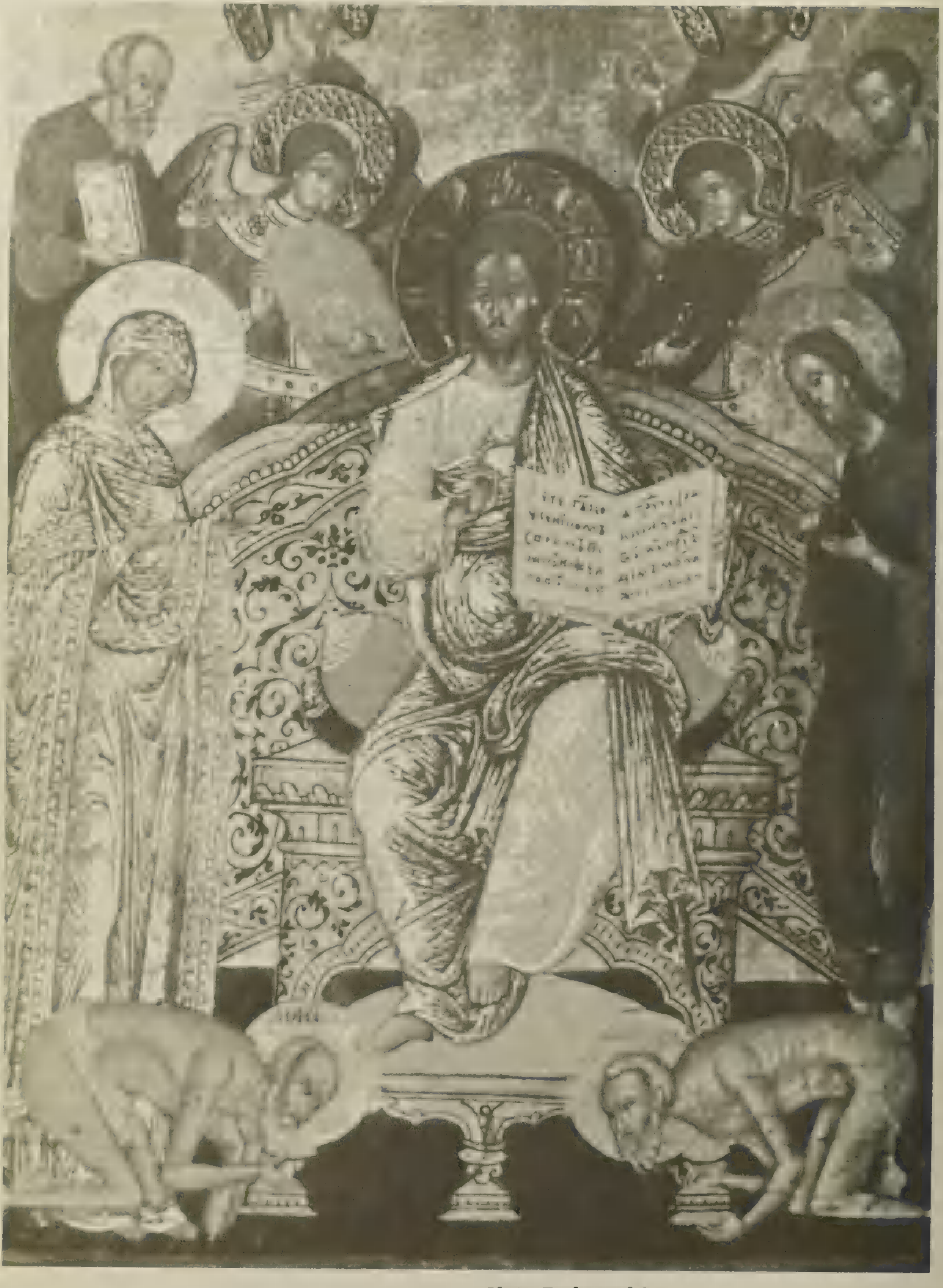
This highlighting procedure is applied not only to clothes but also to other details such as buildings, trees, rocks, and animals. It appears in different and particular forms which have a function in the entire composition and even, as we have seen, a theological meaning.

Highlighting with Hatching Lines

There is another technique for highlighting: the same color, somewhat brighter, is used according to the procedure *probelka*. Draw fine hatching lines in the form of a grill which follows the movements of the person or object, for example the folds of the clothing. Begin with the areas to be highlighted and go toward the shadowy parts; the intensity of the light diminishes as the lines move away from the center of brightness. Thus one layer of hatching marks covers another, and this diminishes the surface of the brighter layer. This work is carried out with a rather dry brush so that the color already applied is not removed by the following layer. The final effect of light is obtained by white hatching marks.

Golden Hatching Lines, Inocopie (Assist)

On ancient icons, a different procedure accented the hatching lines which in turn accented the inner light; painters



Christ Enthroned Surrounded by Saints: *Russian icon, end of the 17th c. (private collection).*

used golden lines. They drew these lines of gold on the stars, the edges of clothing, thrones, seats, gospelbooks, angels' wings, and around halos. Even the inscriptions were written in gold, especially in 17th and 18th century icons of the Stroganov School. In the Tretyakov Gallery, there are two icons of the 12th and 13th centuries on which the hair is made of gold thread: the Face of Christ and the Annunciation of Ustiug. Thisis a rather rare case, however. These golden lines can be drawn with golden powder, but normally a technique called *inocopie* or *assist* is used.

This technique requires a thick and sticky liquid which you obtain by mixing brown beer or garlic juice with the color red. When the layer of paint is very dry and the surface mat, use this liquid to draw the lines that will later be gilded. The lines dry quickly and become shiny. Then, make a little round ball out of fresh bread and press it onto the gold leaf. Blow on the hatching lines to make them sticky. Next lightly press the bread ball onto the parts that are to be gilded. Using a soft brush, remove what is left and then cover the gold with a thin layer of alcohol varnish so that the gold does not come off during the varnishing. This procedure produces golden lines that are more alive, more brilliant than when using gold powder. Because the lines of *assist* are thicker than the paint, we even get a relief effect.

B. Instead of using the highlighting procedure, that is, to advance from the shadows toward the light, we can use the opposite procedure: 'darkening' the foundation colors. It works in the same way as does the highlighting procedure. Add a color of a darker shade to the color used, then treat the whole with the emulsion or with hatching lines. The colors that are to be darkened ought to have been fairly bright to begin with. At the end of the process, however, touches of white must be added.

This procedure is used only rarely, perhaps because it does not allow for the intense coloring that we find in certain schools, the Dionysian or the Moscow School of the 17th century, for example.

This procedure can perhaps be related to the work on golden backgrounds such as that carried out on 17th and 18th century icons. In this case, the shadows are the elements drawn using hatching lines. This style is, however, of little interest because the predominance of decorative elements as well as a certain western baroque influence make the results rather dull, with little joy and depth. Besides, painting on gold leaf is more fragile than painting on a colored background; the gold leaf can easily come off as we have seen on numerous icons of this period.

The Skin Tones

The most important parts of the icon are the face and the hands. The face gives the icon its theological meaning. Beyond all stylization, the face reflects the individual features of the saint and determines the coloring of the clothing whose range of colors is always limited.

The hand gestures determine the way the clothing moves and folds; they also affect the touches of white that accentuate the garments. In a biblical scene or one from the life of the saint, the other elements, such as the buildings or rocks, set the person or persons in a certain space and participate in the gestures.

It is therefore not surprising that the work carried out up to this point is subordinated to what is properly human: the skin tones. The iconographer thus tries to execute the skin tones with all his talent so that the result will be as much like the prototype as possible. This is the source of the gentleness and the transparency of Russian icons as well as the strength and rigor of Byzantine frescoes and icons.

Basic Skin Tones

The basic skin color is different according to periods and schools. It can be either a chestnut shade coming close to olive green or move toward hotter shades, dark or rather bright as in Rublev's icons.

In each case, it is better to closely follow the model to be copied because the skin tone is determined by the style of the particular age. In general, the skin tone is made with a mixture of 1) yellow ochre and burnt umber or 2) yellow, red, and black ochres. With the second composition, we can obtain very differnt colors which will not be too monochrome, that is, these additional colors will not be in the same color range.

In Russian icons, the hair as well as the face must be painted with the basic skin tone. In Greek and Serbian icons, artists usually use a different, darker shade for the hair.

After two or three applications of paint when the skin tone forms a uniform color, the drawing must be redone. To retrace the lines which thanks to the previous engraving process are still visible, use a dark color, a mixture of black and red (*eksedra*).

In most icons, the shadows of skin tones are not painted; they are simply painted with the basic skin tone color. In other icons, the shadows are made with a cold color (*ditch*), a mixture of yellow ochre, black, and white. The procedures are the same as for highlighting. This clarifying of the shadows is carried out either at the beginning or between the first and the second highlightings.

The modeling of the skin tones requires still more finesse than the work done so far. Unfortunately, there are few instructions on this matter in the iconographic manuals such as the *Hermeneia* of Dionysius of Fourna (16th century) or the *Podlinnik* of Pogodine. (1) It is necessary, therefore, to refer to more recent works especially of I. Schneider and P. Feodoroff; these works are inspired by the Russian manuals of the 18th and 19th centuries. The continuity of good technique through the centuries is evident in them. The work of modeling the skin tones is called *v'okhrenie* in Russian (2) that is "work with ochres." We can distinguish four procedures:

1. *Plav'* or highlighting with "melted colors"

First of all, prepare three mixtures of colors which will serve to highlight the skin tones: a) yellow and red ochres; b) add to the first some yellow ochre and a bit of white; c) add some more white to the second.

To obtain a greater continuity of coloring, you can make the two intermediate tones. To obtain the transparency and the "atmospheric" light of ancient icons, avoid too great a difference among the mixtures. With the first color, highly liquified, amply cover the area to be highlighted going from the shadows to the light with a brush. Thus the brighter colors are built up in the brighter parts. Onto this very wet surface, introduce the second color going toward the light. The surface, however, will now be reduced, and the brighter tone must mix on the surface with the preceding color to produce the perfect shading off effect, or scumbling. Then introduce the still brighter mixture always reducing the surface.

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1. See *Manuel d'iconographie chrétienne*, p. 60.

2. Ivan Schneider and Peter Fedorov, *Teknina ikonopisi (The Techniques of Icon Painting)*, Obstsestvo ikona, Paris, 1946.

This procedure is difficult to use because it requires a lot of experience and a certain quickness, but it gives good results. It is moreover the technique of the great masters.

2. *Otborka*, Highlighting with Hatching Lines

With the same colors as in the first procedure, use a fine, nearly dry brush. Following the modeling of the face, draw in some fine lines starting from the light toward the shadow and reducing the intensity of the color. In the brighter sections, you can change the direction of the lines and thus obtain a thin network. In this way, the colors should shade off well going toward the darker zones.

This simpler procedure also gives good results.

3. *Prinplesk*, Highlighting by Dilution

In addition to the colors already indicated, prepare a certain quantity of very diluted emulsion. The brighter shade is applied on the area to be highlighted; begin to spread it out by progressively adding emulsion. The bright color will become less intense and disappear in the dark areas. To avoid lines, spread out the emulsion up to the edge of the skin tones. Then allow everything to dry very well and start the operation over again with the brightest color, always reducing the area to be highlighted.

This procedure is also delicate, but it gives good results.

4. Combined Procedures

At each step, alternate the second and third procedures. First of all, spread out the brighter color by reducing its intensity with the emulsion. After everything has dried well, correct the mistakes with hatching lines as in the second procedure. Then take the second shade using the two procedures as for the first step. In order to better see the mistakes and to re-establish the unity of the coloring, you can cover the whole area of the skin tones, after everything is dry, with a layer of diluted emulsion. The colors will become bright in the drying process and will return to their original shade. This is the shade that the colors will have under the varnish.

In these four procedures, however, the three steps will not be sufficient to obtain a good shading off effect; this will most certainly depend on the painter's talent.

Some icons have red on the cheeks, lips, and chin. To obtain this effect, cover these areas with a thin layer of red after the first step. This layer will then be covered by a second color, but the red effect must not be heavy or else it will contradict Tradition. An icon must show the spiritual beauty, the transfigured flesh. This is why in many icons, red does not really work out properly.

For the shape of the hair and the beard, follow the model very strictly because these shapes are distinctive, proper to each person. Thus the beard of the Saviour and that of St. John the Baptist do not have any locks, or twisted and matted strands of hair. St. Basil's beard is long, pointed, and very dark. The hair color can be dark, reddish-brown, gray, or white. The drawing of the locks is done with a shade darker than that of the skin tones. Between the edges of the locks, draw two brighter lines, well separated. Then apply touches of white but each time limit the lines to the top parts of each lock.

Completing the Skin Tones.

We are always surprised to see the changes in the face brought about by the completion of the last touches of white and the accentuation of the contours. The icon begins to live. This is precisely the meaning of the word *ozivki* "living features"; it designates these white hatching lines which have been colored slightly with yellow ochre. It is difficult, however, to apply them in the correct places. It is therefore necessary to carefully study this point on ancient icons.

Next, redraw the outline of the skin tone areas with a dark color, *eksedra*. The eyebrows are drawn with a line using the color of the hair then some black hatching lines. The eyes are

done with a fine line; the white of the eyes is covered with a thin layer of bright ochre and gray, *reft*.

The iris is normally oval shaped and chestnut in color, brighter around the pupil which is always black and often oval shaped. The lips are usually small and narrow; draw them with a thin line of dark color, *eksedra*. They can be drawn with a light red tint.

Finishing The Icon

To finish his work, the iconographer checks all the details he has put on, repairs the mistakes, redraws the lines so that his work will be satisfactory. Then he finishes the frame, cleans it by rubbing it with a damp cloth, and covers it with paint. The frame is often painted with the same color as the background. The backgrounds used to be rather bright, often gold leaf. At Pskov, however, green was predominant; at Novgorod, the backgrounds were red as for Elijah and St. George. In Moscow from the 16th century on, the backgrounds became rather dark, going as far as chestnut. In the Stroganov School, we often find shades of dark olive green. These colors correspond to the style of icon painting. The contemporary painter who does an icon using stylistic elements from a certain period must, of necessity, use the same range of colors for the background as was used in that period. Between the paint and the interior edge of the frame, we often find a thin white line; on the outer edge of the frame, a strip of about 5 mm. (.19685 in.) covers the cut sections of the board. By optical illusion, an icon with a bright background and frame appear to be larger than an icon whose background and frame are of a dark color.

Sometimes, we find figures of saints and scenes of their lives on the wider frames. This work, however, requires time and great talent.

The only thing left to do is draw the contours of the halos and make the inscriptions. This work is done in red and chestnut shades, even in gold-*assist* or in *ocopie*--if the background shade is dark. The painter determins this, as well as the background color.

The Inscriptions

At the end of this long and minute work, we arrive at the moment when this painting becomes an icon. It is by the inscription that the image receives all its spiritual dimension, its sacred character. The origin of this notion is probably found in the meaning of the name in the Old Testament. The name is not simply a distinctive sign or title; it is a communion with the bearer of the name. Through the inscription, the icon is linked to its prototype, the person represented in it. Along with this person, the icon participates in the heavenly liturgy and makes this celebration present in our midst. This is why the inscriptions are done in one of the languages of the Byzantine liturgy, Greek, Slavonic, Arabic, etc. As modern languages are being accepted by certain Orthodox churches, it seems natural that their alphabets be used also in icons, provided that the characters are not too gaudy.

The inscriptions on Russian icons are done in the Cyrillic alphabet. St. Cyril and St. Methodius, the apostles to the Slavs, around 850 translated the Holy Scriptures into Old Bulgarian, the language of the area around Thessalonica. Their work is of great historical importance since it not only permitted the evangelization of the Slavs but also gave these peoples the basis of their literary culture. Slavonic, somewhat Russified, is today the liturgical language of the Orthodox Churches of Russia and the Balkan countries. Like Greek, Slavonic uses many abbreviations especially for titles such as apostles, martyr, etc. The list of the most frequent titles in Slavonic and Greek appears later on. In fact, Russian icons have kept certain Byzantine abbreviations for Christ, the Mother of God and sometimes the word "saint." In addition, in Christ's halo, there are always written letters *O ON*, that is "He who is" which is the name revealed by God to Moses during the episode of the burning bush.

The shape of the letters, especially the Slavonic ones, vary considerably from age to age. From the beginning up to the 12th century, the letters were rather simple, very close to actual writing. In the 14th century especially in manuscripts, they became more massive, as though they were built inside rectangles and with accentuated vertical lines. They formed strips of a strong and monumental rhythm. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the letters became even thinner. At the same time, a cursive style of writing developed in which the letters leaned slightly to the right. From the 12th century on, there existed a form of inscription with very high, intertwined characters, *viaz.* Later on, these shapes were to be used especially in the Stroganov School. In the 18th century, the letters were still rather high, but their vertical lines were thicker and very closely and tightly packed.

The shapes of the letters thus help us to date certain icons provided, of course, that the inscription was not added during a more recent restoration. This is difficult to determine, however, when dealing with reproductions. A careful examinaton of the icon itself should be made along with an analysis of the style. The artistic level of the inscriptions varies considerably. The *ductus* of the characters and their harmony in the whole inscription reveal the hand of the master.

Varnishing

The varnish on an icon is not just used to protect the painting from humidity, the fading action of light and air, and accidents. Because icon varnish, olifa, is a greasy, penetrating varnish, it also unites the different layers to give them their typical harmony in depth and light. It also helps preserve the freshness of the coloring during the centuries.

Olifa, however, presents some problems. It takes a long time to dry; it retains the soot from candles; and it thus forms a dark layer on ancient icons which often dulls the colors. Up until the beginning of our own century, people often thought that icons naturally had a very dark coloring. The first scientific restorations, on the contrary, showed the lively and joyous colors of the Middle Ages. Besides, the thick layers of olifa which had been built up by restorations carried out by well-meaning but not very knowledgeable workers were very sensitive to temperature changes. Cracks began to appear and even fragments of the paint chipped off. If the varnishing is done well, these problems can be avoided.

Olifa is prepared in the following way: heat some good quality linseed oil in a container. When it begins to smoke, at about 285°C, remove it from the heat and add the powders that serve as a drying agent, stirring them in with a stick. These are the proportions:

1) colbalt acetate 3% 3 gm/lt
2) white lead or litharge 7-8%

Once the oil has cooled, it must be filtered. Next pour it into a transparent bottle. To remove the color from it, expose the oil to light or the sun. The bottle must be tightly sealed. You can add some "damar" crystals dissolved in turpentine. In Greece, painters used to expose the oil to the sun for forty days in order to obtain this varnish.

The preparation of olifa is very difficult and is not always a success. It is also difficult to find the powdery drying agents in small quantities. It is often necessary, therefore, to be content with commercial canvas varnish, such as "the golden varnish for aging canvases." These varnishes, however, form a film on the surface and do not penetrate in depth. In addition, they must be diluted with purified turpentine before being used.

The actual varnishing process is as follows: after having carefully removed all dust from the icon, pour the olifa onto the surface and spread it out with your finger or a soft brush. The layer must be rather thick. Keep the icon horizontal. To protect it against dust in the air, cover the icon with a box. At the end of 20 minutes, equalize the layer of olifa with the palm of your hand since the olifa will have been absorbed irregularly. After 20 minutes, the olifa begins to thicken; then remove the surplus oil with your hand. Next allow the icon to dry in the box for 36 hours. It will be necessary to redo the layer once or twice but each layer must be thin. At the end of the work, the layer should be uniform, slightly shiny, like the result you would get under wax.

When the icon is completely dry, sometimes it takes several weeks, you can cover it with a thin layer of gum-lac or French polish. The dust will not cling to the surface.

The icon is now ready. All the preceding descriptions cannot however transmit the experience gained by generations of iconographers. To complete this experience, contact with an experienced iconographer is therefore essential. Moreover, no other technique, oil painting or acrylics, gives the possibilities of expression that egg tempera affords; it alone suits the requirements of the aesthetic vision proper to the spiritual world of the icon.

A Brief Summary of the Steps in Painting

The First Layers of Paint

1. Cover the surface of the board to be painted with a uniform layer of egg yolk.
2. Prepare the colors: grind them and add water until a homogeneous paste is obtained.
3. Dilute the color with the egg yolk emulsion.

4. Cover the different areas according to the colors of the model without making any shadows or half-tones. The layer must be thin and uniform; avoid deposits . The faces and the hands: yellow ochre, red and a bit of black.
5. Allow to dry then put a thin layer of egg yolk on each area separately.
6. Redo the different layers of color until you obtain a uniform surface.

Redrawing

1. Redraw the outline of the elements in the icon with a fine brush; the engraved lines should show through under the layer of paint. Add some black, red ochre, blue, etc. to the colors of the different areas (local shade).

Highlighting

1. Mix the local shade with brighter colors and a bit of white.
2. Apply the colors on the areas to be highlighted; rapidly add some egg yolk diluted with water (1/1) thus working out the shading off effect.
3. Allow to dry and put on a layer of egg yolk.
4. Repeat this operation two to four times.
5. For the skin tones, mix yellow and red ochres and diminish each time the proportion of red ochre.
6. For the last time that the highlighting procedure is carried out, increase the proportion of white.
7. Add hatching lines of very bright colors to the areas which have been highlighted the most.
8. Add a bit of green to the skin tone to do the hair.
9. Put on the color used for the icon's background.

The Finishing Process

1. Draw in the golden hatching lines.
2. Redraw the contours and the folds.
3. Accentuate the touches of white with crushed gesso.
4. Draw in the halos with red ochre and black, and put on the inscription.

Varnishing

1. Spread on the olifa with your finger.
2. Repeat the process every 20 minutes and equalize the mat areas during 2 or 3 hours.
3. Put on 1 to 3 layers of French polish after letting everything dry completely for 2 to 4 days.

THE GREEK ALPHABET

α Α α	1 A	π Π	80 P
β Β	2 V	ϟ	90
γ Γ	3 GH	ϱ Ρ	100 4
δ Δ	4 THE	σ Σ Ϲ	200 S
ε Ε Є	5 E	τ Τ	300 T
ϛ	6	υ Υ V	400 EE
ζ Ζ	7 Z	φ Φ	500 F, PH
η Η	8 EE	χ Χ	600 KH
ϑ Θ θ	9 TH	ψ Ψ	700 PS
ι Ι	10 I	ω Ω ω	800 O
κ Κ	20 K	ϡ	900
λ Λ	30 L	͵α	1000
μ Μ Μ	40 M	͵β	2000
ν Ν	50 N	ΙΑ	11
ξ Ξ ξ	60 X, KS	ΙΒ	12
ο Ο	70 O	ΙΓ	13

Dipthongs and Consonant Groups

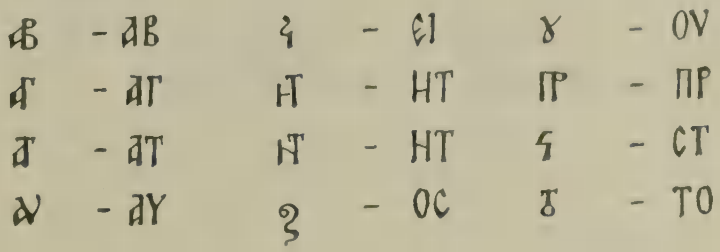
ευ ЄΥ – EV, EF υι ΥΙ – EE

ει ЄΙ – EE αυ ΑΥ – AV, AF μπ ΜΠ – B, MB

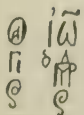
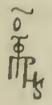
αι ΑΙ – AY ου ΟΥ – OD, OU ντ ΝΤ – D, ND

οι ΟΙ – EE ηυ ΗΥ – EEV, EEF

Contractions



INSCRIPTIONS USED FOR GREEK ICONS

Ι͂Ϲ Χ͂Ϲ	Jesus Christ
Ὁ ΠΑΝΤΟΚΡΆΤΩΡ	Pantocrator
Μ͂Ρ Θ͂Υ	The Mother of God
Ἡ ΠΛΑΤΥΤΈΡΑ ΤΩΝ ΟΥΡΑΝΩ͂Ν	Platytera (More Spacious Than The Heavens)
Ἡ ὉΔΗΓΉΤΡΙΑ	Hodigitria (She Who Knows The Way)
Ἡ ΓΛΥΚΟΦΙΛΟΥ͂ϹΑ	Loving Kindness
	St. John the Forerunner
 Ὁ ΠΡΟΦΉΤΗϹ	The Prophet
ἘΞΑΠΤΈΡΥΓΑ ϹΕΡΑΦΕ	The Six-Winged Seraphim
ΧΕΡΟΥΒῚΜ	Cherubim
ἈΡΧΆΓΓΕΛΟϹ - ἈΡ͂	Archangel
ἌΓΓΕΛΟϹ	Angel
ἈΠΌϹΤΟΛΟϹ	Apostle
ἘΥΑΓΓΕΛΊϹΤΗϹ	Evangelist

Ἡ ΦΙΛΟΞΕΝΊΑ ΤΟΥ͂ ἈΒΡΑΑΜ	The Hospitality of Abraham (The Holy Trinity)
Ὁ ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙϹΜῸϹ ΤΗ͂Ϲ ΘΕΟΤΌΚΟΥ	The Annunciation of The Mother of God
Ἡ ΧΡΙϚΟΥ͂ ΓΈΝΝΗϹΙϹ	The Birth of Christ
Ἡ ὙΠΑΠΑΝΤΉ	The Meeting, The Presentation
Ἡ ΒΆΠΤΙϹΙϹ	The Baptism
Ἡ ΜΕΤΑΜΌΡΦΩϹΙϹ	The Transfiguration
Ἡ ΒΑΪΟΦΟΡΟϹ	Palm Sunday
Ὁ ΜΥϚΙΚῸϹ ΔΕΙ͂ΠΝΟ	The Mystical Supper
Ἡ ϚΑΎΡΩϹΙϹ	The Crucifixion
Ἡ ΕἸϹ ἍΔΟΥ ΚΆΘΟΔΟϹ	The Descent Into Hades
Ἡ ἈΝΆϹΤΑϹΙϹ	The Resurrection
Ἡ ἈΝΆΛΥΨΙϹ	The Ascension
Ἡ ΠΕΝΤΕΚΟϚῊ	Pentecost
Ἡ ΨΗΛΆΦΗϹΙϹ	Thomas Sunday
Τὸ ΓΕΝΈϹΙΟΝ ΤΗ͂Ϲ ΘΚΥ͂	The Birth of The Mother of God
Ἡ ΚΟΙΜΉϹΙϹ ΤΗ͂Ϲ ΘΚΥ͂	The Dormition of The Mother of God

WRITING STYLES

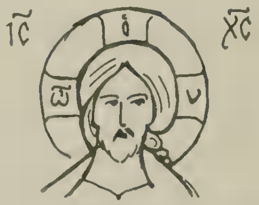
Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου ιῦ χῦ	ἈΡΧῊ ΤΟΥ͂ ΕὐΑΓΓΕΛΊΟΥ ἸΗϹΟΥ͂ ΧΡΙϹΤΟΥ͂	9TH C.
ΟΨΙΑϹΔΕΓΕΝΟΜΕΝ͂	ὈΨΊΑϹ ΔΕ ΓΕΝΟΜΈΝΟϹ	11TH C.
ΔΙΑ ΧΗΡΟϹ ΔΕ ΚΑΜ͂ ΙΩ͂	ΔΙΑ ΧΗΡΟϹ ΔΕ ΚΑΜΟΥ ἸΩΑΝΝΟΥ	13TH C.
ἘΓῺ ϊΜῚ Ἡ ἈΝΆϹΤΑϹΙϹ	ἘΓῺ ΕἸΜῚ Ἡ ἈΝΆϹΤΑϹΙϹ	17TH C.

THE SLAVONIC ALPHABET

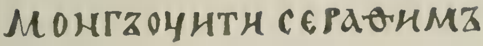
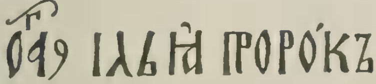
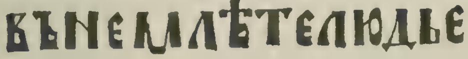
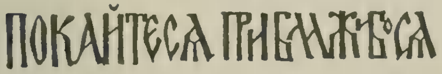
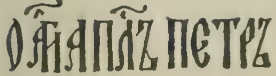
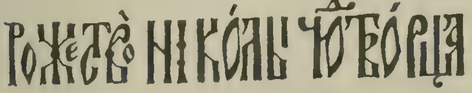
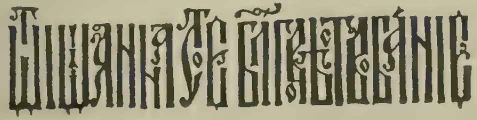
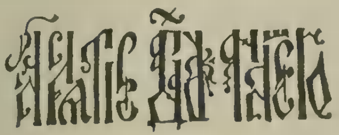
А а	1 A	Н н	50 N	Ъ ъ	HARD SIGN
Б б	B	Ѡ ѡ ꙍ	800 O	Ы ы	E (UI)
В в	2 V	О о о	70 O	Ь ь	SOFT SIGN
Г г	3 G	П п	80 P	Ѣ ѣ	IE
Д д	4 D	Р р	700 R	Ю ю	YOU
Є є	5 E	С с с	200 S	Ꙗ ꙗ	YA
Ж ж	ZH	Т т	300 T	Ѧ ѧ	YA
Ѕ ѕ	6 Z	Ѹ ꙋ	400 OU, OO	Ѿ ѿ	OT
З з ꙁ	7 Z	Ф ф	500 F	Ѳ ѳ	9 TH
И и	8 EE	Х х	600 KH	Ѱ ѱ	700 PS
І ї	10 EE	Ц ц	900 TS	Ѯ ѯ	60 KS
К к	20 K	Ч ч ч	90 CH	Ѵ ѵ	400 EE
Л л	30 L	Ш ш	SH		
М м м	40 M	Щ щ	SHCH		

ABBREVIATIONS

а҆гг҃елъ	а҆́нгелъ	ANGEL	мр҃ ѳ҃ꙋ	(GREEK) ΜΗΤΉΡ ΘΕΟΥ͂	MOTHER OF GOD
а҆рхг҃елъ	а҆рха́нгелъ	ARCHANGEL	мч҃къ	мꙋ́ченикъ	MARTYR
а҆п҃ / а҆п҃лъ	а҆по́столъ	APOSTLE	о҆ц҃ъ	о҆те́цъ	FATHER
бл҃женный	блаженный	BLESSED	првⷣкъ	праведникъ	RIGHTEOUS
бг҃ъ	богъ	GOD	пртⷣе́ча	предте́ча	FORERUNNEF
бцⷣа	богоро́дица	MOTHER OF GOD	прпⷣбный	преподобный	BLESSED
бжⷭ҇тво	божество́	DIVINITY	прркъ	проро́къ	PROPHET
влⷣца	владь́чица	SOVEREIGN	прс҃таа	пресвѧта́а	MOST HOLY
вел҃	великїй	GREAT	с҃в	свѧты́й	HOLY
вмч҃къ	великомꙋ́ченикъ	GREAT MARTYR	ст҃ль	свѧтитель	BISHOP
воскрⷭ҇нїе	воскресенїе	RESURRECTION	сп҃съ	спасъ	SAVIOUR
гдⷭ҇ъ	госпо́дъ	LORD	трⷪ҇ца	тро́ица	TRINITY
дх҃ъ	дꙋхъ	SPIRIT	чꙋд҃	чꙋдотворецъ	WONDER-WORKER
є҆пп҃ъ	є҆пи́скопъ	BISHOP	хс҃	(GREEK) христосъ	CHRIST
і҃с / і҆н҃съ	і҆нсꙋсъ	JESUS	цр҃ь	царь	KING



WRITING STYLES THROUGH THE CENTURIES

	МОНГЪОЦИТИ СЕРАФИМЪ	NOVGOROD, 12TH C.
	О̑ А́ГІОСЪ І̓ЛЬѦ́ ПРОРО́КЪ	NOVGOROD, 14TH C.
	ВЪНЕ́МЛѢТЕ ЛЮДЬЄ	PSALTER, 14TH C.
	ПОКАЙТЕСѦ ПРИБЛИ́ЖИБОСѦ	RUBLEV, 1408
	О̑ А̑ГІОСЪ АПО́СТОЛЪ ПЕТРЪ	MOSCOW, 16TH C.
	РОЖДЕСТВО́ НИКО́ЛЫ ЧѸДОТВО́РЦА	STOGANOV SCHOOL, 17TH C.
	ОТ ІѠА́ННА СВѦТО́Є БЛАГОВЕСТВОВА́НІЄ	MOSCOW, 18TH C.
	РАСПѦ́ТІЄ ГОСПОДА НА́ШЕГО	BEGINNING OF THE 19TH C.

Chapter 14

The Palette Of The Ancient Iconographers

Introduction

The richness of the coloring in icons and frescoes, as well as the quality of their pigments, raise the following questions: Where did these colors come from and where were they made? In the iconographers' manuals, especially after the 16th century, there are numerous indications and recipes which give many details, but their terminology is often vague. This is why the voluminous works of specialists in the 19th century are not without their contradictions and leave many questions open. Therefore, to determine the exact nature of a pigment mentioned in such and such a manuscript, we must not only know the iconographic literature of the Middle Ages but complete it with analyzes in restoration laboratories. A recent study brings together two aspects of the research in this area. (1)

As literary sources, the study uses three important manuals of the 16th to the 18th centuries. Dating from the 16th century, the first manual originated in Novgorod and contains three books. It is called *Litzevoi podlinnik, A Manual for the Painting of Persons.* The first book contains the description of saints in calendar-order with indications of the colors for clothing and accessories. Unfortunately, instead of being precise about the pigments, the book only indicates the general coloring. The second book deals with the rules of iconography, and the third talks about techniques and the making of colors.

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1. L. V. Kouznetzova, "O pigmentakh drevnerusskoi tempernoi zivopisi" ("On the Pigments of Russian Tempera Painting in Ancient Russia"), *Voprossy restavratzii (Restoration Questions)* Academy of Arts, Moscow, 1978, pp. 63-83.

The second document is a manual of the 17th century, and the third is the 18th century Palekh manual. Palekh was a group of villages in northern Russia where iconographers lived.

These manuals illustrate all the influence of Byzantine paintings which in itself was based on a thousand years of experience as we see in the works of Theophrastes in the 4th century B.C. (2) At this early period, many receipes were already known, and they were still used in the Middle Ages for making pigments. This transmitted experience is the basis not only of Dionysios of Fourna's manual but of the treatises on painting written during the Renaissance in the West.

This vast domain of workshop activity, the production of pigments, has conditioned the artistic creations and thus is common to both the East and the West. To a certain degree, therefore, the two worlds perfect and complement each other. The mineral deposits in the various countries favored a local production of pigments which through commercial channels found markets in cultural centers.

White

Psimythion, "Belila" (3): White Lead

This is one of the most widely used pigments in iconography: either for (1) high lighting, mixed with other pigments or, in its pure state in *probely*, for (2) the final white hatching lines on faces and clothing. The process of making it had already been described by Theophrastes. He said to put thin lead plates into a container of vinegar. The oxidation took about four weeks in a warm place. Removing what was left of the lead, the oxide could be seen. The oxide should be washed and then ground into a fine powder. According to the manuals, this is simply white lead whose chemical formula is $2\,Pb\,CO_3 \times Pb\,(OH)_2$. Its technical name is lead carbonate.

This pigment was also used in Western painting even up to the 19th century. In Russia, it was produced in the Kachin and Yaroslavl regions but was also imported from Germany through the port of Archangel.

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2. Here we are dealing with a treatise entitled *(On) the Stones*, according to Kouznetzova, see note 1 above.

3. The first term in italics is the Greek word given by Theophrastes; the following ones in quotes and normal type are various Russian equivalents.

Ochre

Ochra, *"Ohra": Ochre*

Ochres are widely used in iconography. First of all, they are used for faces and visible parts of the body, in a mixture called *sankir*. They are also used for clothing, mountains, and buildings, in mixtures of white, black, and green. Ochres were inexpensive colors. German ochre, a bit brighter, and Greek ochre, slightly red and very costly, were also known.

Natural ochre is a sediment made up of the following: for yellow ochre, the mineral limonite ($Fe_2O_3n\ H_2O$) is the coloring agent and for red ochre, the mineral gemanite (Fe_2O_3). In Greece, artists used to import ochres from Cappadocia. Theophrastes described the technique for changing yellow ochre into red ochre: workers heated the yellow ochre in new pots until it took on a red coloring. The chemical process is very clear: when heated, iron hydroxide ($Fe_2O_3.n\ H_2O$) becomes iron oxide (Fe_2O_3). The quality of the artificial ochre is not as good, however, and it is less luminous.

In antiquity, red ochre was called *miltos*. The most famous red ochre came from the island of Chios which had to deliver its entire production to the Athenians. The intensity of the color depends on the percentage of iron oxide. Normally this is about 20%, but it can be as high as 80%.

Another name for red ochre is *sinopis;* it came to Greece from Cappadocia via the city of Sinope on the coast of the Black Sea.

Yellow

Arrenikon, "Zhelt," "Blaigelb," "Bliaguil," "Shizguil" "Kron": Lead Yellow or Chromium Yellow

The directions for painting saints rarely mention yellow. We do not know exactly why since yellow was certainly present on the iconographers' pallettes. In the lists of colors, there are three yellows that derive from lead oxide: "zhelt," "blaigelb," or "bliaguil." Another yellow comes from a vegetable source, "shizguil." For the making of "shizguil", artists used the black fruit of the buckthorn plant, of the rhamnaceous family, which produces a yellow coloring agent. Since the 17th century, the mineral color chromium yellow, "kron," has also been known. Theophrastes mentioned the yellow color *arrenikon*. It is found in the form of brilliant crystals in gold, silver, and copper mines in Cappadocia and Mysia. Chemical analysis has shown it to be natural arsenic sulphite, As_1S_3.

Red

Kinabaris, "Kinovar": Cinnabar, Vermilion

This pigment was already known in the 3rd millenium B.C. by the tribes of Maikop culture in southern Russia. In antiquity the Greeks imported it from Colchis and Iberia, the present Soviet Georgia. The pigment that came from these regions, mercury sulphite, Hg S. was known for its purity. It was also found in rhomboidal crystals in layers of bright red earth. To extract the pigment, the artists only had to reduce to a fine powder the crystals and fragments of pyrite contained in the mercury sulphite. In Russia, high quality vermilion came from the Mikitov region.

The 17th century manuals also describe a chemical procedure used to obtain vermilion. They mixed mercury with sulfur in a 1: 2 proportion. This pigment was widely used because it was inexpensive. It is often found in color mixtures and even replaced ochres.

"Sourik": Bright Red

This bright red is not used in the descriptions of the saints but appears in all the lists of colors. It was easily made by heating white lead until it became bright red or orange. As a substitute for this pigment, the manuals recommended a mixture of vermilion and yellow. "Sourik" was also used as a drying agent to speed up the drying of the olifa. Its chemical formula is Pb O. It covers well but is toxic and not solid. It is modest in cost and thus widely used.

"Bakan": Carmine

In the Middle Ages, several kinds of carmine were known: German, Florentine, or Venetian carmine. The last of these was the best, but expensive. Since this pigment was in great demand, the manuals recommended that it be replaced by a mixture of vermilion and ochre. Later on, real carmine was manufactured in Central America by boiling cochineals in an acid salt; the result was a magnificent fine red powder. In Russia artists used similar kinds of insects called *tchervets* caught in June and July. This is where the name of the pigment, *tchervlen'*, comes from. Another procedure made use of a precious tropical wood, sandalwood, imported from Brazil through the port of Archangel. When put into an acidic liquid, the colorless extract of this wood takes on a carmine red color.

"Tchervlen'": Dark Carmine

This pigment is a mineral and received its name from the carmine extract of cochineals, but its red is close to brown. It was produced especially in the Pskov region. Its chemical base is iron anhydrous oxide.

Green

"Praselen": Pale Green

Numerous indicatons in the manuals show how important this color is for icons. Iconographers used it to paint the earth, the mountains, and backgrounds which did not need to be very bright. Most often, the "praselen" was a mixture of different yellows and blues. To obtain this shade, artists also used green earths in the Bohemian and Verona green category. These earths are mostly made up of glauconite, a mineral whose intensity depends on the proportion of iron trivalent silicate. It is found in clayey earths.

Ios, "Yar-medianka": Verdigris

Since antiquity, people have known that in acid solutions cooper produces salts that can serve as coloring agents. Dionysius of Fourna indicates that to make this pigment copper must be exposed to the action of vinegar in a warm place. Since vinegar was expensive in Russia, artists used curdled milk. The casein gave a slightly bluish shade to the verdigris. To deepen the greenish tint, yellow colors were added. And because verdigris does not react well with egg yolk, it was necessary to add some honey to stabilize it. To prevent it from turning black, some white was mixed in. As a substitute, Venetian green was also used, but it is tinged with blue and was expensive.

Chrysokolla, "Selen": Mineral Green

This color is often called for in place of "praselen," but it is more luminous. As "selen" was very expensive, it was replaced with a mixture of verdigris and a little blue. Theophrastes already knew of "selen" by the name of *chrysokolla*, this green mineral was made by grinding malachite, a blue-green crystalline mineral, into a powder and then washing it to purify it. It is made up of natural copper hydrated carbonate, $Cu\,CO_3.\ Cu\,(OH)_2$ and is called *berggrine* from the German *berggrun*.

Blue

Kyanos, "Lazor", Ultramarine

The manuals often indicate the color "lazor" for clothing and the mixtures used for highlighting. It should be assumed, however, that a light blue shade is being referred to and not a specific pigment because the true blue of lapis lazuli was rare and expensive. Nonetheless, in certain cases, lapis luzuli can be seen in the icons of St. Peter and St. Paul, 11th century, and Andrei Rublev's St. Paul.

In Greece, three kinds of blue were known. Cyprus blue was made up of powdered lazulite. The second was Egyptian blue and was very much appreciated in the whole Mediterranean area up until the Middle Ages. It was also called "Alexandrian frit." Egyptian blue was an artificial pigment made from copper and formed from light blue irregular crystals. The third blue was lapis lazuli; it merits a special section because of its superior quality.

Lapis lazuli blue came from the Badakhstan region of Iran where important deposits of lazulite were found. To obtain a pure pigment, the lapis lazuli was reduced to powder, and then heated in a mixture of wax, resin, and oil. A bit of potassium carbonate was also added. The mixture retained impurities, however. The approximate chemical formula for lapis lazuli is $Na_{8-10}A_{14}Si_{6024}S_{2-4}$. In 1917 artificial ultramarine was produced and is very close to lapis lazuli's chemical formula, In the 18th century, the name "lazor" was also used for Berlin blue.

For painting walls, the manuals also mention copper blue made from a base of lazulite; it covers poorly however. To obtain a layer that covers well, a layer of dark gray, "reft," must be put on and then stained with copper blue.

"Kroutik, Sin": Indigo Blue

This pigment is indicated in the manuals from the 16th century on. It was modestly priced, and so it was preferred over other pigments. Today it is believed that this pigment is none other than the indigo imported from the Indies and very well known in Western Europe. In Russia this name is unknown, but there was a plant, also used in Germany and in Greece, which in the Middle Ages was called "kroutik" or "sinilo" from which comes the name "sin." It is known today by the name of "vaida," in English "woad," and contains indigo. The pigment was made by boiling the plants in milk or in an alkaline water.

"Goloubetz": Light Blue

Since this pigment is rather costly, the manuals advise that it be replaced by mixtures of other blues with white. Its exact nature is still uncertain. Some artists compare it to bright lapis lazuli, others to vivanite, a blue ochre, and still others to azurite which is found mixed with malachite and was well known to ancient iconographers.

Black

"Tchernila": Ivory Black, Vine Black

Artists used a black obtained from the burning of fir trees, especially for dark gray, "reft"; they also had an organic black from bones which corresponded to our ivory black. It is used for painting grottoes, the inside of windows, inscriptions, and in mixtures.

Mixed Colors

"Sankir": Skin Tones

This is the basic color for faces and the visible parts of the body. The main pigment is yellow ochre mixed with black, white, and sometimes green. Two or three shades are made by using this color and are used in highlighting. The composition of this mixture is indicated in all the manuals, but it varies according to the periods and the authors. On icons of the pre-Mongolian period, the 11th to 13th centuries, there is a slight green shade to the skin tones and this gives the faces a melancholic gentleness. In Rublev's time, the skin tones were bright and hot, reflecting a transfigured joy. In the icons of Master Dionysius, in Moscow at the beginning of the 16th century, the skin tones become still hotter and darker. For the last period, until the 18th century, they are very dark with pale touches of white. "Sankir" and white were also used in painting clothing and white hair.

"Bagor": Browing Red

This is a color of a redder shade than "sankir" because it is mixed with black and vermilion or carmine. It is often indicated for the clothing of the Virgin.

"Reft": Dark Gray

Black, white, blue, vermilion, and also a bit of ochre are used in the making of this color. Its shade varies according to the indication of the manuals. It is used for buildings and clouds and in mural painting for the background as we have already indicated.

"Ditch": Brownish Gray

This is the least distinct color. According to the manuals, it is a mixture of 1) carmine, blue, and white or 2) ochre, blue, and vermilion. The result is a strange or "savage" shade, as the name indicates. It was often used for monks' clothing as a symbol of their asceticism.

"Eksedra": Blackish Red

This color is a mixture of black and carmine which was used for drawings of the skin tones and for inscriptions.

Conclusion

This list of colors shows that the palette of iconographers was very rich and required a great deal of knowledge in order to be used properly. Even if many colors were bought, the artists and their aids had to make most of them. In addition to pure pigments, there were color mixtures which despite their variations had definite names; they thus had their place and their function in the range of pure colors. To produce the colors, the masters relied on a secular tradition and themselves transmitted a surprising technical know-how. This is evident even to the eyes of modern chemists who, by analyzing the colors, can testify to the rigor of their composition.

15

The Techniques and Style of the Ancient Iconographers

Introduction

All painting techniques found in the 19th century Russian manuals are still those which continue the long Byzantine tradition. We must suppose, however, that there were other practices because the ancient icons manifest variations that are not indicated in the manuals.

Despite their common elements, it is necessary to distinguish Greek and Russian techniques. At different periods, they both show that the masters tried to find procedures that best represented their interior worlds and that at the same time enlarged the possibilities of traditional techniques. Perhaps the styles and variations are only the materialization of each era's interior vision and its interpretation. If this is true, there would then be a relation between the spirituality and the painting techniques. These questions, however, have not yet been studied well enough to provide precise answers. We will therefore have to be happy with only some general indications.

The Greek Technique

After the iconoclastic controversy when Byzantine painting abandoned the encaustic technique for tempera, it had at its disposal the rich experience of ancient Greek painting. This artistic tradition was already aware of the oil technique because painters had begun, at least in part, to replace wax as the binding agent of the pigments with a mixture of oil and various resins. The colors thereby improved their solidarity and freshness. With this technique, the optical effect of relief is obtained by using layers of different, often complimentary colors. Aristotle called this procedure *epipolasis*, that is, the background shining through transparent layers, scumbling with often pure colors. The background layer thus took on a sort of relief appearance using deep shadows and superimposed, hardly perceivable highlighting. This technique using transparent layers constituted the essential element of icon painting and attained a rare perfection in the works of Theophane the Greek, Panselinos, and is Russia Andrei Rublev, to name only the best known masters of the Middle Ages.

After the iconoclastic period, the use of tempera, a mixture of pigments with a binding agent soluable in water, aided in the development of two aesthetic elements in icons: the drawing and polychromy.

Because the opaque layers of the icon's different parts do not permit the passage from the foreground to the background and vice-versa, the outline always remains precise; the drawing thus takes on a great importance and must be in harmony with the whole. It must also structure the object represented and give it a life and movement that radiate out from inside. Despite the colored areas set side by side, the icon thus keeps its unity.

Another characteristic element is polychromy. The iconographic canon determines the colors for the clothing of the persons represented and lends itself to a polychromatic conception of the image. The painter must create the composition using colors within the limits of this canon, and this requires of him a lot of workshop experience as well as a precise interior, spiritual vision. The modeling effect through highlighting is not carried out by lighter shades of the same color that has already been applied but by layers of different colors.

For the skin tones, the Greek procedure always begins with a very dark local shade, *proplasmos*, a mixture of black, green, and earths. The highlighting can be done by modeling with white hatching lines that follow the outline of the face and bring out the lighter areas. Then by putting on a layer of a red shade, *glykasmos*, successive scumblings cover the whole in which ochres dominated.

Another procedure used the color of the *proplasmos* and added yellow ochre and red to the first modeling with hatching lines. For the following layers, the proportion of yellow ochre, red, and white were increased and each time the size of the area to be highlighted was reduced. The final hatching lines were always white. For a binding agent, artists used an emulsion that contained one part egg yolk, one part oil, and two parts water. By shaking the mixture, a thick liquid resulted that could be diluted during the work. The board was inclined or set upright, propped up on an easel as shown in the icons representing St. Luke.

Many of the icons in the Byzantine museum in Athens were painted according to this way of using hatching lines. These icons are surprisingly precise and have a great expressive power.

Another possibility consisted of producing shadows with *proplasmos*, by allowing the white background of the icon to show through on highlighted areas. Then it was necessary to cover the whole with layers of skin tones as in the preceding technique.

For the clothing, touches of white on the folds were applied with well delineated layers. By reducing the surface to be covered, the following layer was also precisely determined. Therefore, there were three or four increasingly lighter layers building up to the white drawn near the folds in black. This procedure of putting on limited layers was also used for the faces for which a greater number of layers was used.

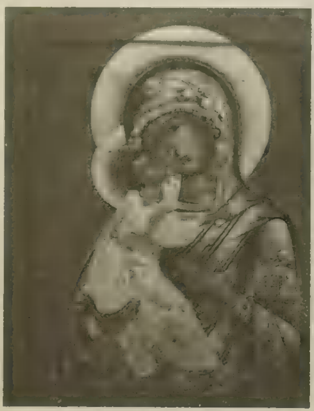
The few icons of the Constantinople School that have come down to us show how the Greek iconographers also obtained the delicate modeling effect of "melted colors," called "plav" in Russia. The Virgin of Vladimir, which is attributed to this school, is a magnificent example of this technique. On the Virgin's shining face, there radiates a hot light that bursts forth from slightly green skin tones. The noble design and delicate modeling make the Vladimir icon a masterpiece of this technique.

The Russian Technique

From Byzantium, Russia received not only its Christian faith but also iconography and its technique. The Chronicles speak of Greek icons and the fascination they held for the faithful. One such Russian marvel was the icon of the Virgin venerated in Vyshgorod; this icon was later transported to the city of Vladimir which gave it the name that it carries to this day. Besides the Greek iconographers who worked for the court and the Church, there already existed a local school whose center was the Monastery of the Kievan Caves.

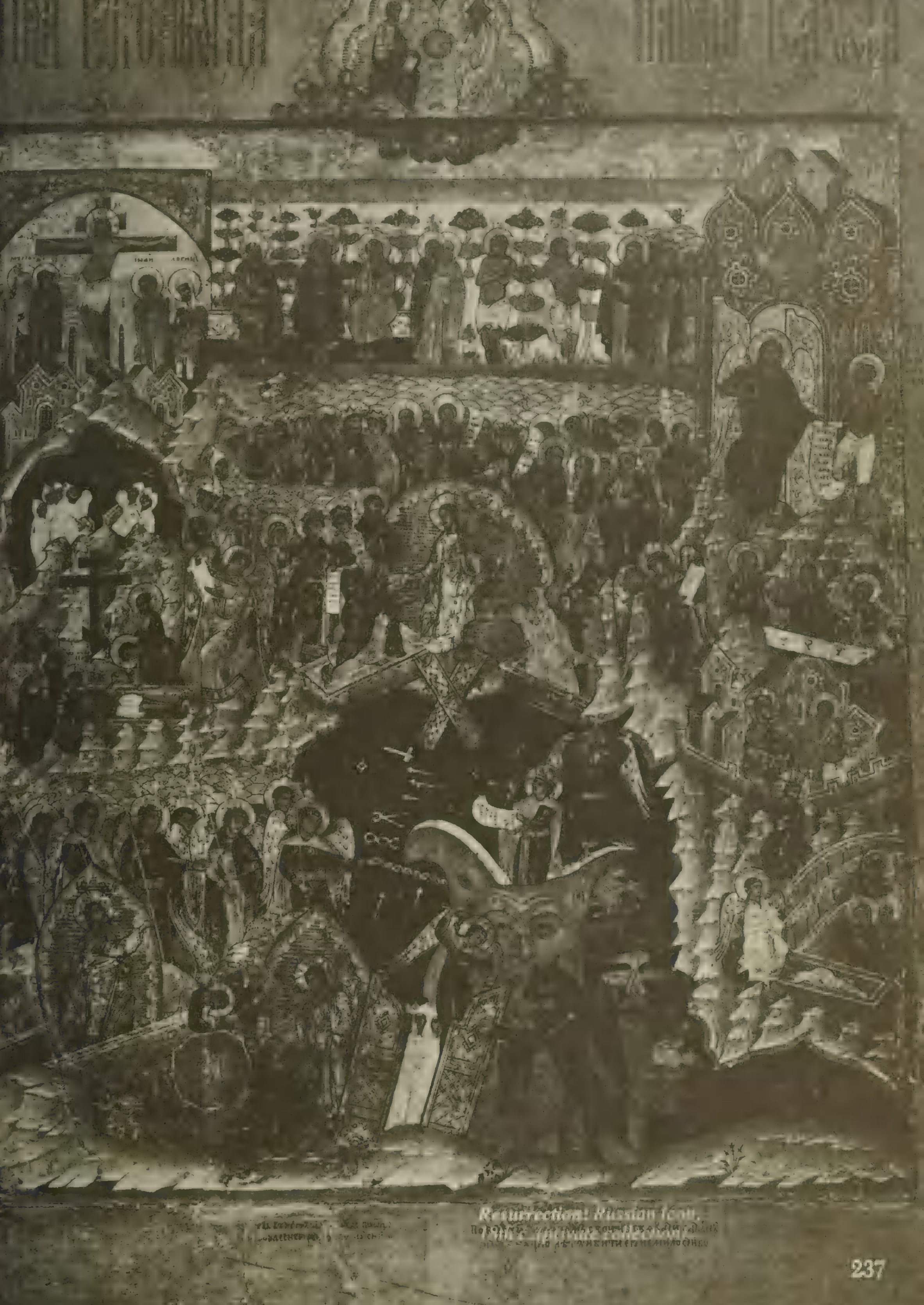
In Kiev, a very different style from that of Constantinople was to be born and develop. Even though the icons from the 10th to the 13th centuries are simpler and their technique less perfect, their transparency and the golden hatching lines on the hair and clothing give them a mysterious look. The layers of local shades are thin and irregularities in the layers can be detected. The system of folds marked with dark lines is simple, and the highlighting effect using wide bands or strips reminds us of the Greek technique. In the same way, the skin tones have a greenish tint like that of *proplasmos*. The modeling of the face is soft and shows a great mastery of plav, the "melted colors" technique. Monumental icons, however, also used the technique of separated layers to bring about the highlighting effect. Still later on in 18th century manuals, we find the limits of these layers drawn on the faces somewhat like the contour lines on a geographical map.

The Novgorodian style developed on the basis of this technique. The local shade became opaque, the highlighting followed the strongly stylized drawing, with nearly straight lines. The last touches of white were drawn with precision. Thus even small icons manifest a monumental character.



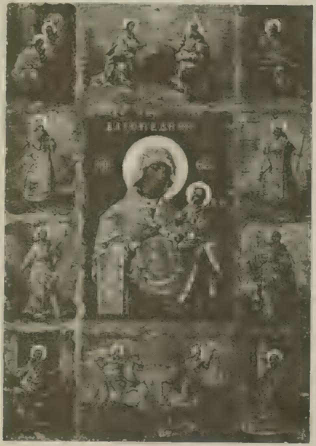
The arrival of Theophane the Greek deeply marked Novgorodian iconography. Despite his sure and dynamic drawings, Theophane was above all a painter. On his Transfiguration icon, we can see transparent backgrounds, nearly scumblings. As on frescoes he applied touches of white to his icons without intermediary shades, using surprisingly sure brush strokes. (plate 32) While he was executing his painting, he seemed to be able even to correct his design without erasing the preceding lines. He thus gives the example of a freer graphic conception and shows that the icon does not always have to be done according to the very delicate technique of building up one layer on top of another. For the faces, however, he used the Greek technique with *proplasmos*, hatching lines, and intermediate layers of "plav". Being able to handle all the possibilities of the technique, Theophane is rightly considered to be one of the greatest iconographers.

According to the technique of his disciple and co-worker, Andrei Rublev, the drawing-design dominated, a harmonious design whose lines and contours created a perfect unity. In the Trinity icon, for example, the drawing of the central angel's garment is very geometric, in the Novgorodian style. The angels on the sides, in contrast, are drawn with a gentle and calm movement. The same difference is apparent with the colors. The opaque blue garment has built up layers; on the garments of the two side angels, we can see transparent backgrounds with free touches of white. This is what creates a marvelous luminous quality. (plate 29) Rublev gave a bright and joyous coloring to his skin tones, and his highlighting in "plav" is of a rare perfection. If Theophane's painting expresses a certain ecstasy, Rublev's reflects a world where harmony and joy reign.



Resurrection. Russian icon,
17th c., private collection.

After the fall of Constantinople, Byzantine painting produced still other masterpieces, in the Balkan countries and especially in Crete, but its brilliance was later on to fade under Western influence. In Russia, Rublev's art exercised its influence even up to the 18th century, and several Moscow synods designated it as the model for iconographers to follow. But already in the 16th century, a slow stylistic mutation was occuring which reflected the civilization of the age. The growing power of the Grand Duke of Moscow, his wealth and taste for representation were expressed in the art of icons. Ornaments became important and were the dominant element in the 17th century. Painting became dainty and the icon was miniaturized. It lost its monumental character. The drawing became minute and fragile, and the highlighting process was reduced to a few white lines, somewhat like embroidery. (plate 33) In order to bring out the highlighting and the ornaments with golden lines, the artists painted with dark colors in which browns and reds dominated. Even greens and blues were mixed with hot colors thus reducing their brilliance. In this way, the radiant coloring of the 15th century, in which pure colors had formed a luminous polychromy, was abandoned.



Nonetheless, this era was still able to produce masterpieces. It distinguished itself by its finesse in drawing, the precision of its golden hatching lines, the modeling of skin tones, and painting on gold leaf. This latter procedure replaced the highlighting by the glow that shone through the colored hatching lines.

The use of metal in iconography was a logical consequence of this evolution. As a result, gold and silver coverings, with precious stones and pearls, were developed. But the growing importance of the decorative element brought with it the loss of the icon's meaning as a presence of mystery. The sacred was hidden behind a costly veil, and the icon's message no longer easily and freely touched the heart of the faithful. (plate 35)

This blend of style and technical evolution in iconography is surprisingly complimentary. The ideas of an age, its spirituality, and its tastes determine the style of its language and art objects which express its spiritual values. It was the painters' task to interpret these characteristics by using their experience and their ingenuity to discover new technical possibilities. The most astonishing thing about this evolution is that it took place within the framework of a tradition which, thanks to the strict rules of its canon, safeguarded the theological character of the image.

Conclusion

The icon is a work of art which goes beyond art. Far from being limited to the aesthetic level, the icon's message is of a theological order. This is precisely why the icon speaks to people of our time just as it spoke to people of past ages. Even though the contemporary interest in icons includes some disquieting elements, such as fadism and snobism, the timelessness of the Christian faith is again made manifest.

In fact, the icon is first and foremost the living proclamation of the value of matter. Being a creation of God, it can bear witness to God. Just by its existence, each icon makes reference to the incarnation. Not in theory but in practice, the icon affirms that man has the possibility of speaking about God and that he has a language for witnessing to his faith.

But any language, artistic or other, even one as rich and as sumptuous as that of Byzantine art, remains inadequate for speaking about God, as the Fathers of the Eastern Church have often said when they spoke of apophaticism. Thus we must not idolize the icon. By giving it its place, we do not give it more than is proper because it still belongs to the realm of the senses, to the order of created matter. If we deny the icon the possibility of expressing God in its own way, we would certainly deny not only its goodness as created matter coming from the hand of God, but also its divino-human value which it has due to the incarnation. Nonetheless, the icon does not suppress the other orders, those of the spirit and charity. Even if it is related to them, the icon does not claim to replace either the creed or the sacramental mysteries.

Once these essential principles are recalled, it becomes easier to situate our work and method. Our aim has been to set out the objective nature of the icon; this, in fact, is the question we have constantly kept in mind.

In the first part, we sketched out the evolution of the icon as a current within Christian art as a whole. We tried to make clear the theological reflection which gives it its meaning. Then we considered the icon's aesthetic elements. Finally, we described techniques. Thus, on the basis of the exterior aspect alone, we can discern certain structures that constitute a real language, one which clarified and defined itself under the influence of the spiritual and philosophical movements in the Byzantine world.

This "phenomenological" approach allows us to view the icon somewhat objectively at a time when publications on the subject sometimes cannot escape the dangers of an ideological and mystically subjective interpretation. Though this method may appear to be a bit heavy and without mystical depth, it situates us better at the heart of Christian spirituality which respects the incarnation and does not scorn matter.

These convergent studies (historical, aesthetical, and theological) present a conception of the image whose technical procedures (drawing, spatial representation, colors, and the various ways of treating light) open onto a world of orderly and often overflowing richness. This world is dominated by the effort to shake off the earthly and let the glory of God burst forth.

The unique place of the icon within Christian art is better understood and explained if Byzantine art is compared with the art of the West. Certainly, Western religious art possesses a dogmatic content and is rooted in Scripture and Tradition. But in its forms and techniques, it is dependent to a greater degree on the artistic creations of each age. On the other hand, Eastern Christian art requires that the artist, in his interpretation of a subject, conform rigorously to a tradition of theological meaning. This tradition is as precise as it is rich. This is why Byzantine art created structures which were always motivated by a more explicit vision of faith than was found in the Western tradition. Byzantine art's main concern is to transform earthly forms so as to make the heavenly world visible.

This is the essence of the Byzantine aesthetic vision. It dominates all interpretation of the artistic works to which it has given birth. These elements, however, are not the absolute criteria for Christian art. Each conception of art—eastern and western—reveals values and limitations at the same time. In brief, Western religious art risks losing the theological dimension due to the dominance of purely aesthetic elements while Eastern Christian art may freeze theology in a formal traditionalism.

What is more, this theologically oriented aesthetic vision is not necessarily obvious in all icons. It is not absolutely necessary for the making of an icon. In its long history, the art of icon painting has known periods of decadence and lifelessness.

Even though its tradition permits it to constantly renew itself, a real icon is always a new interpretation, a creation, that reflects the interior vision of the painter, and this requires great qualities in the iconographer. Councils and synods of the Orthodox Churches have always insisted on the fact that the painter must be a man or woman of prayer and ascetical practice. To fulfill the role of interpreter of God's revelation, the iconographer must avoid every distraction, must pray and fast. It is along this spiritual path that the Spirit of God will speak through him. Thus the custom of not signing a work expresses the profound desire of the iconographer to be, as much as possible, the instrument of the Holy Spirit. It is up to the painter to make of his image an icon by inscribing the name of the saint that is represented. And the blessing is finally the acceptance by the Church of the work which thus becomes a source of grace for those who look at it.

In this last stage, the icon realizes its reason for being. The long preparation of the board, the painting, the concern to go beyond earthly forms to make God's world visible: all these find their final goal here. In looking at the icon of Christ, St. John of Damascus was able to exclaim: "I have seen the human form of God, and my soul is saved." (plate 36)

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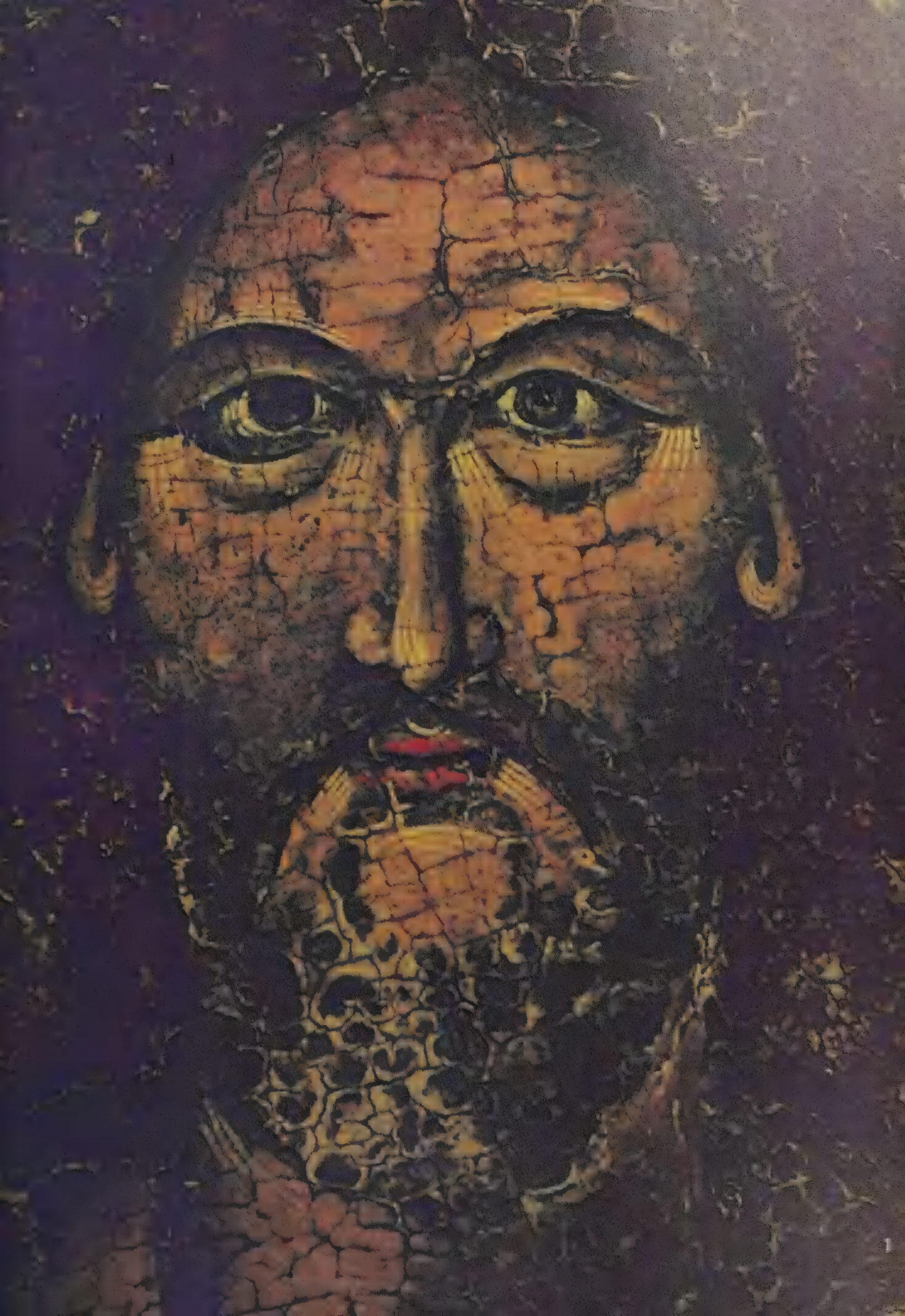

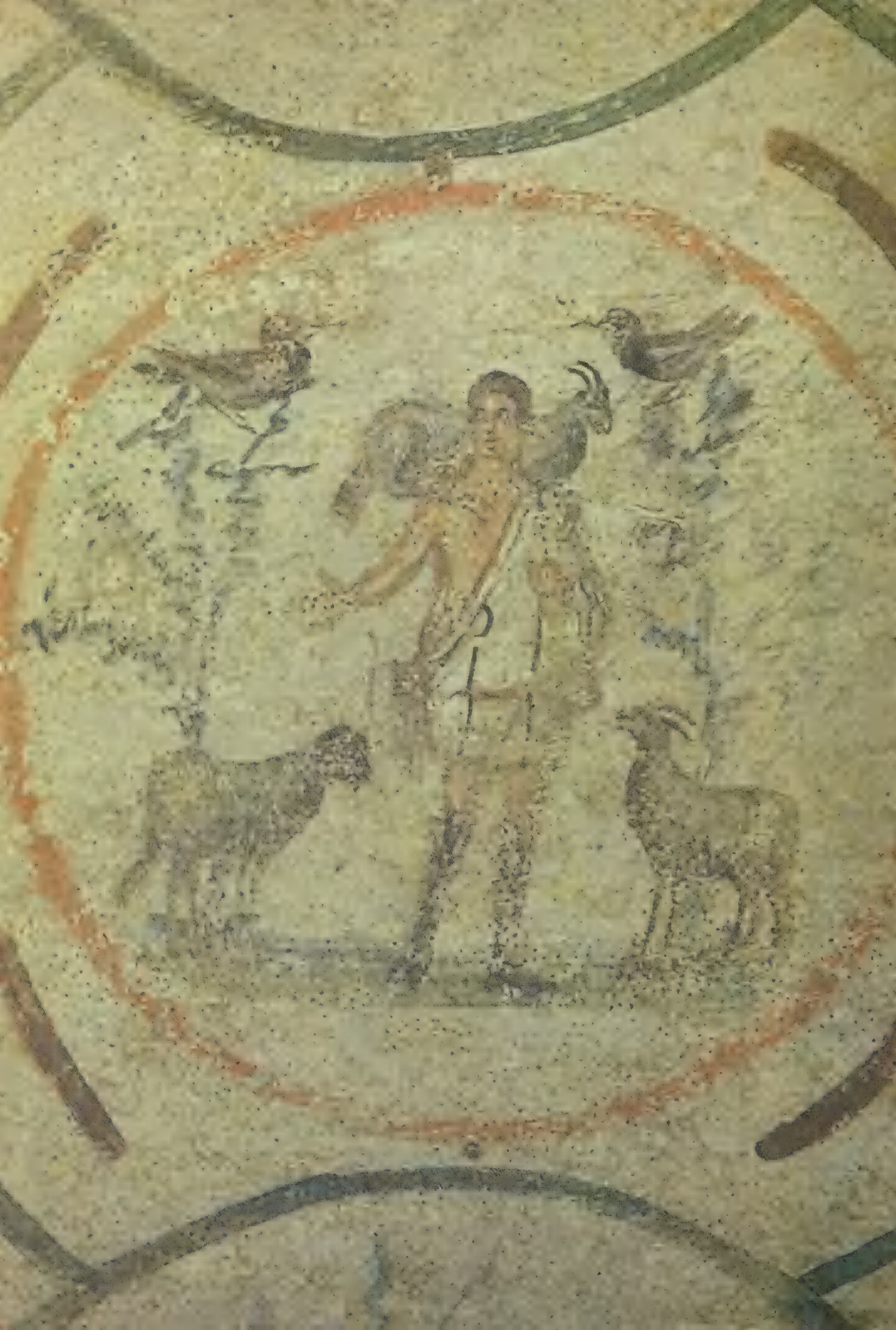

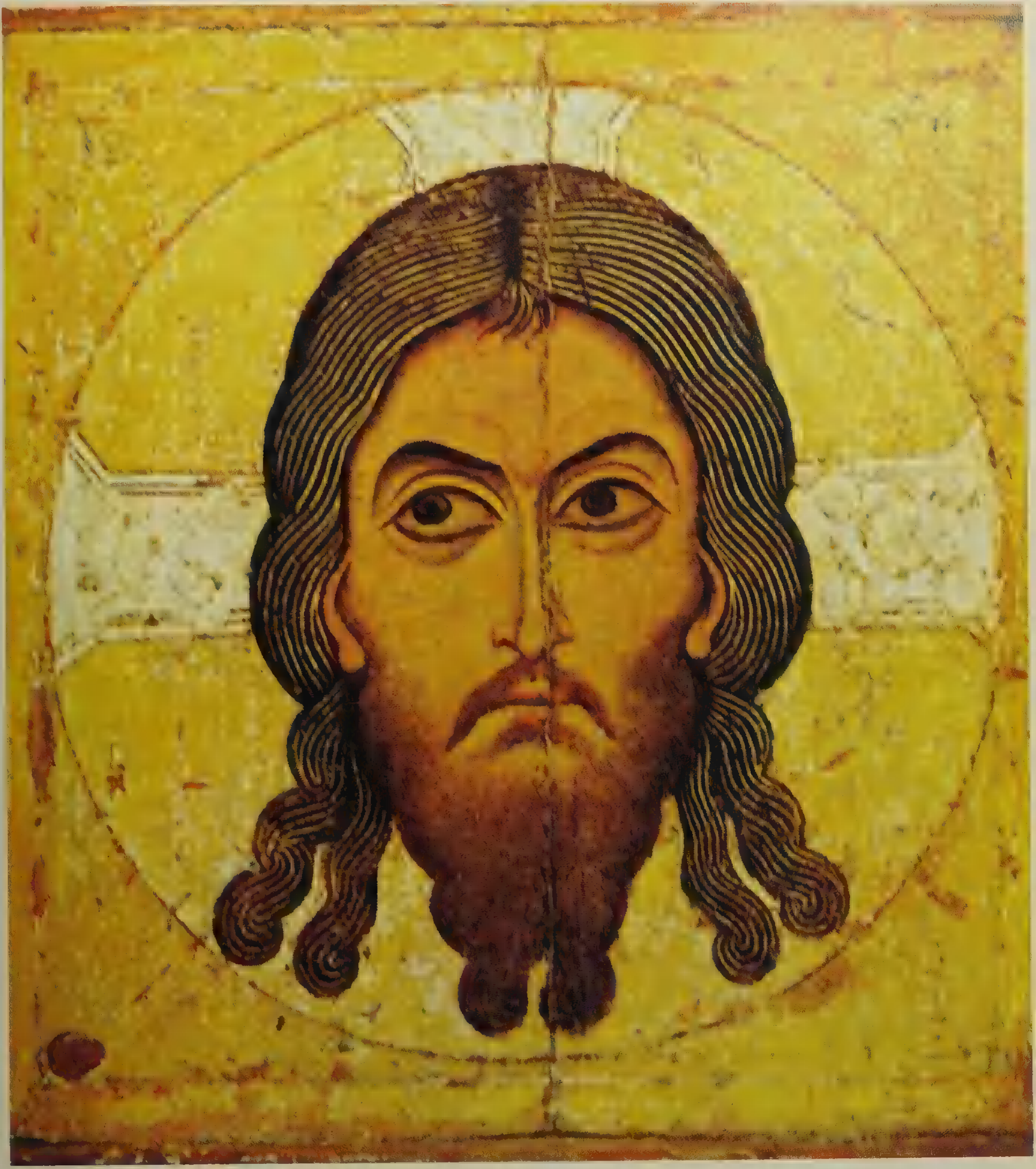

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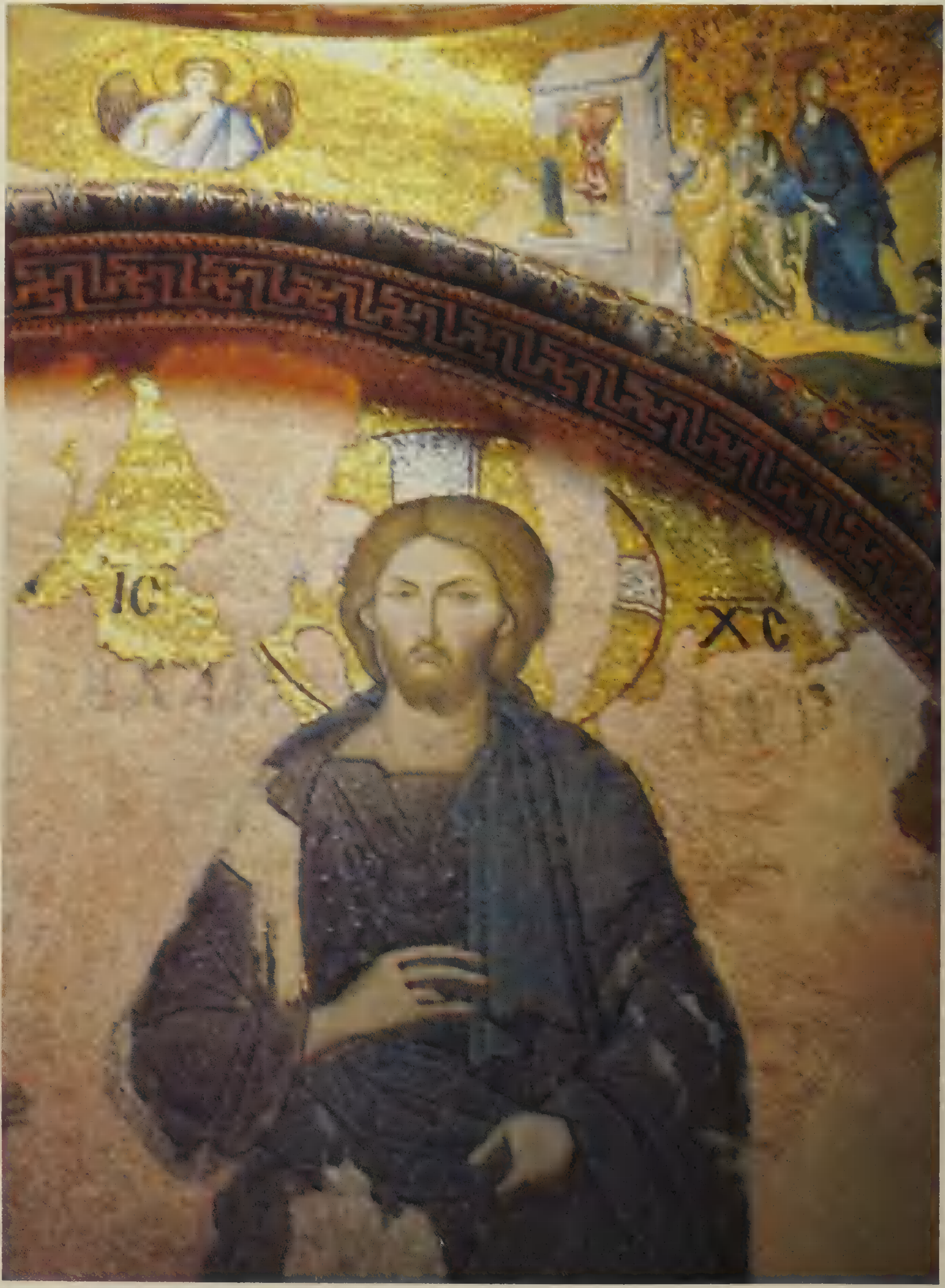

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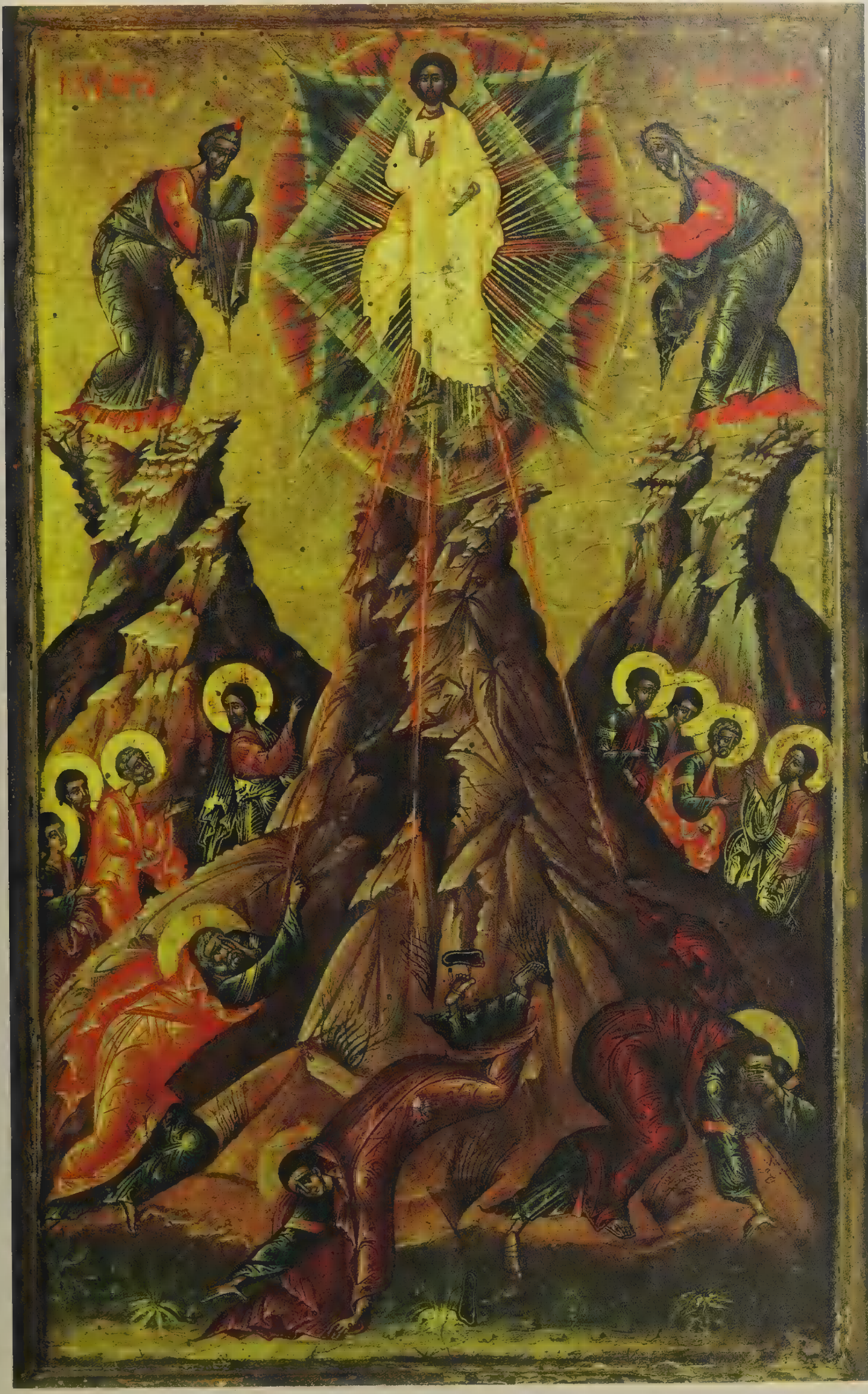

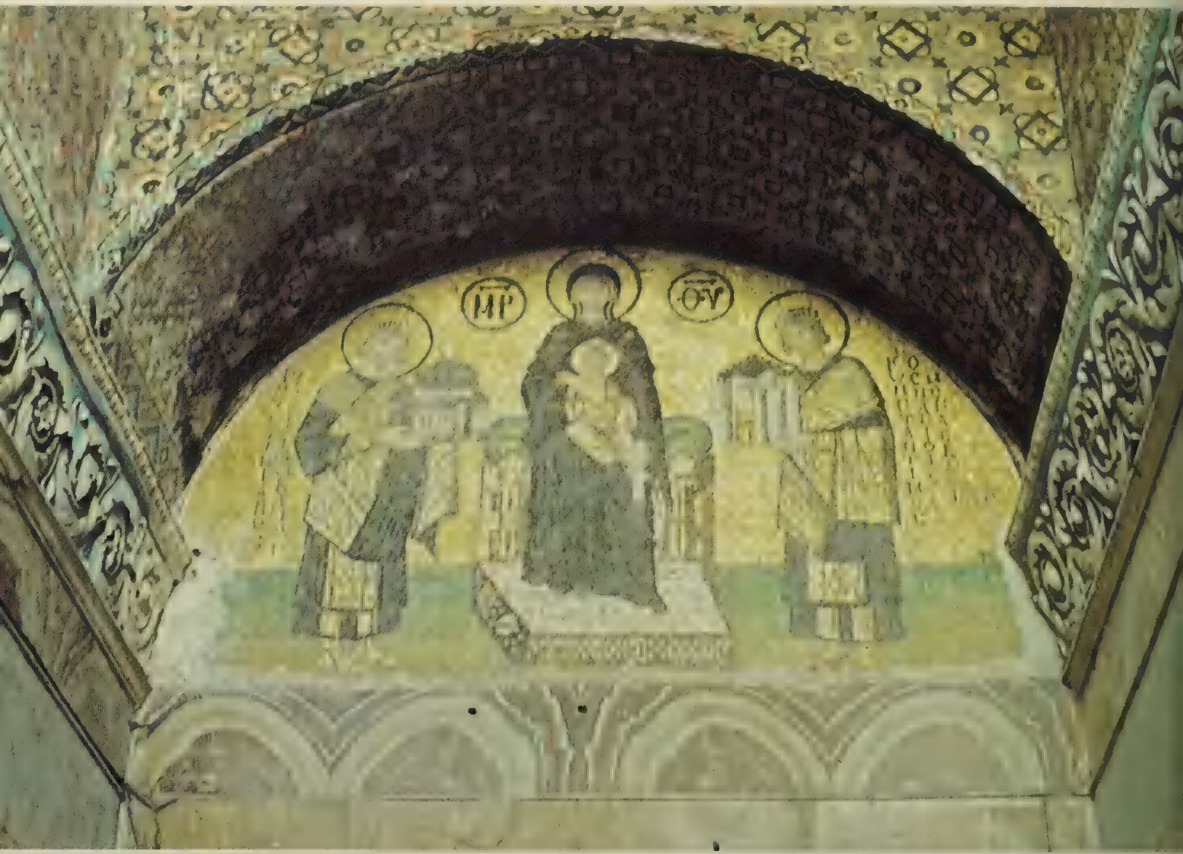

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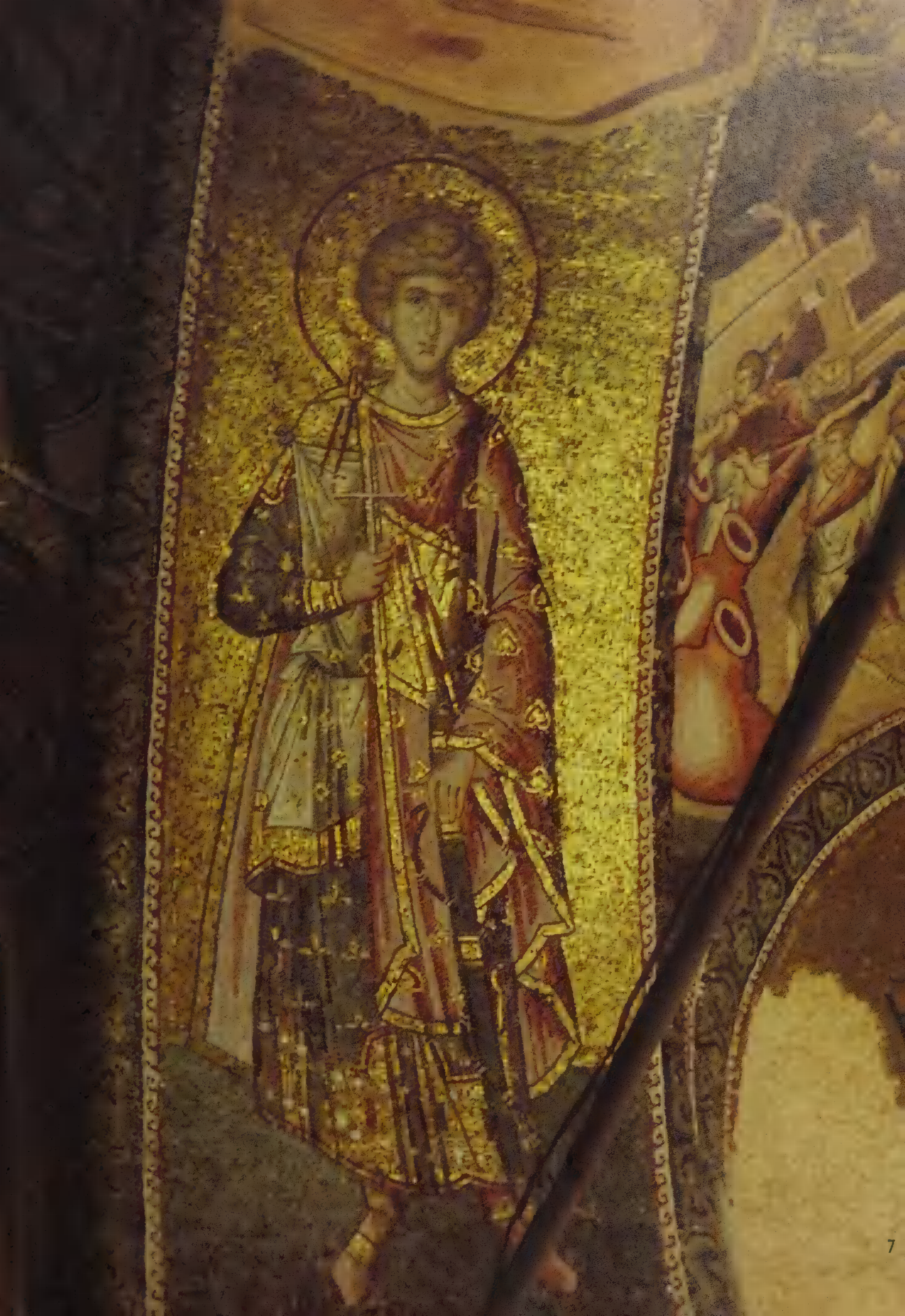

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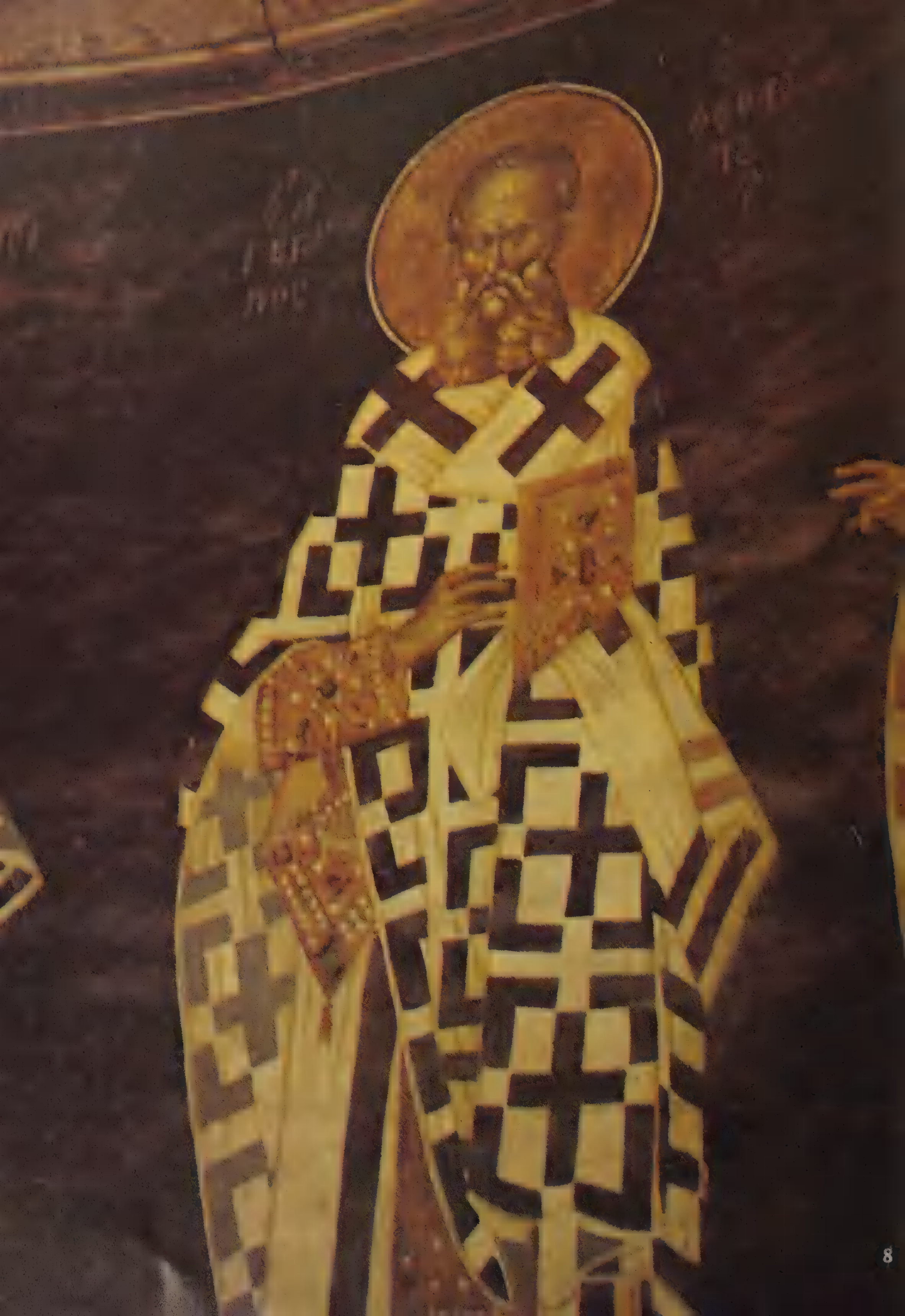

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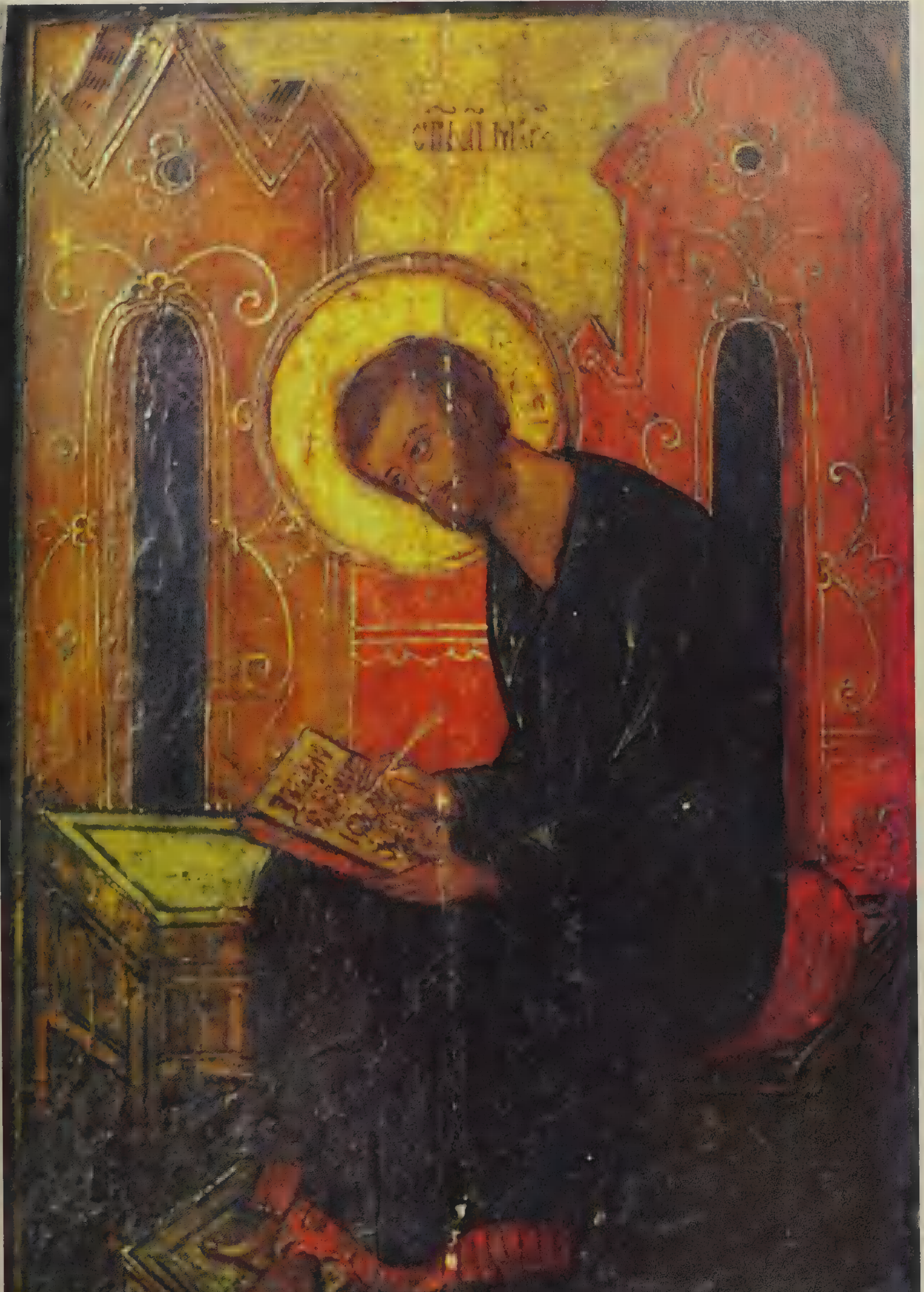

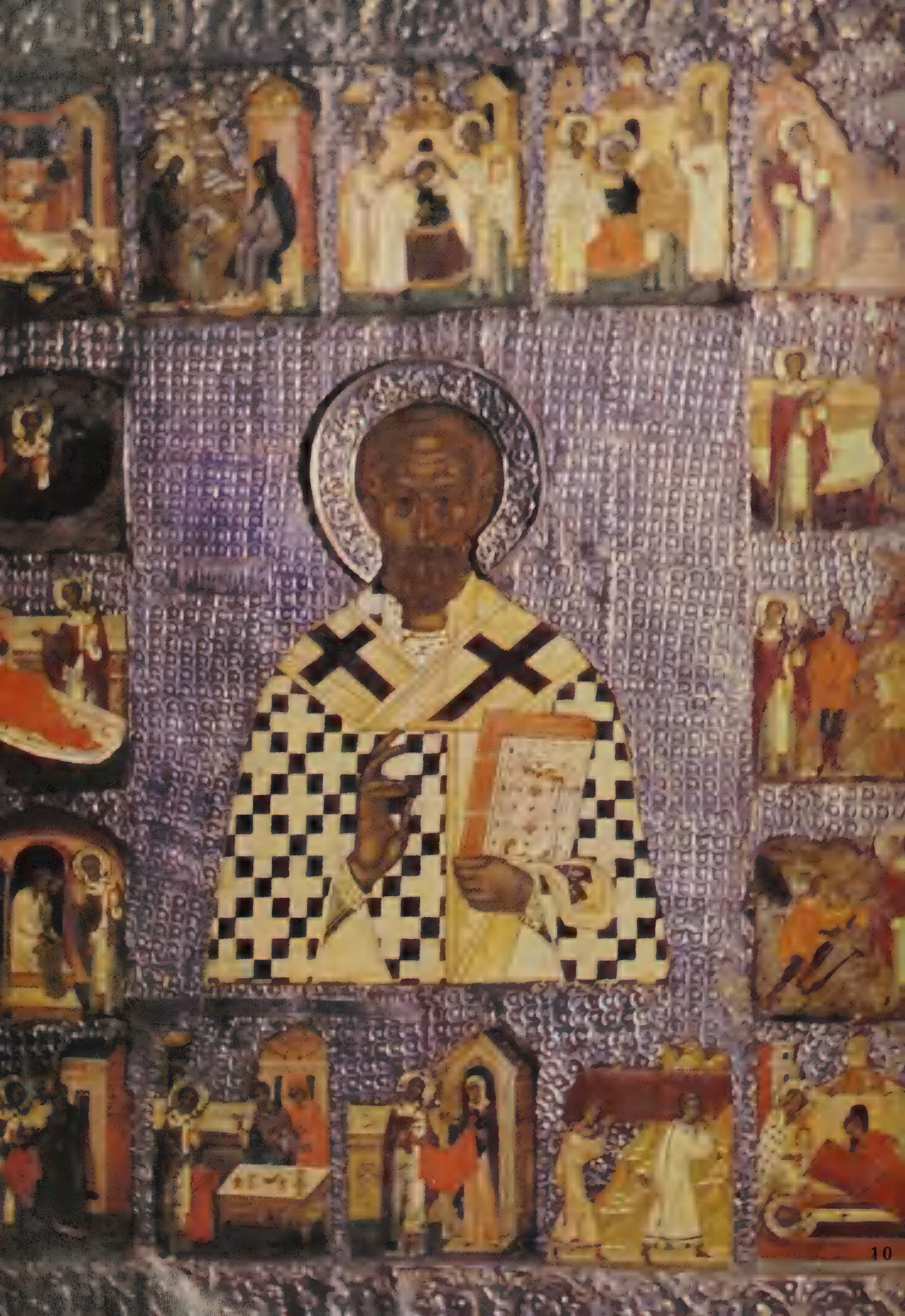

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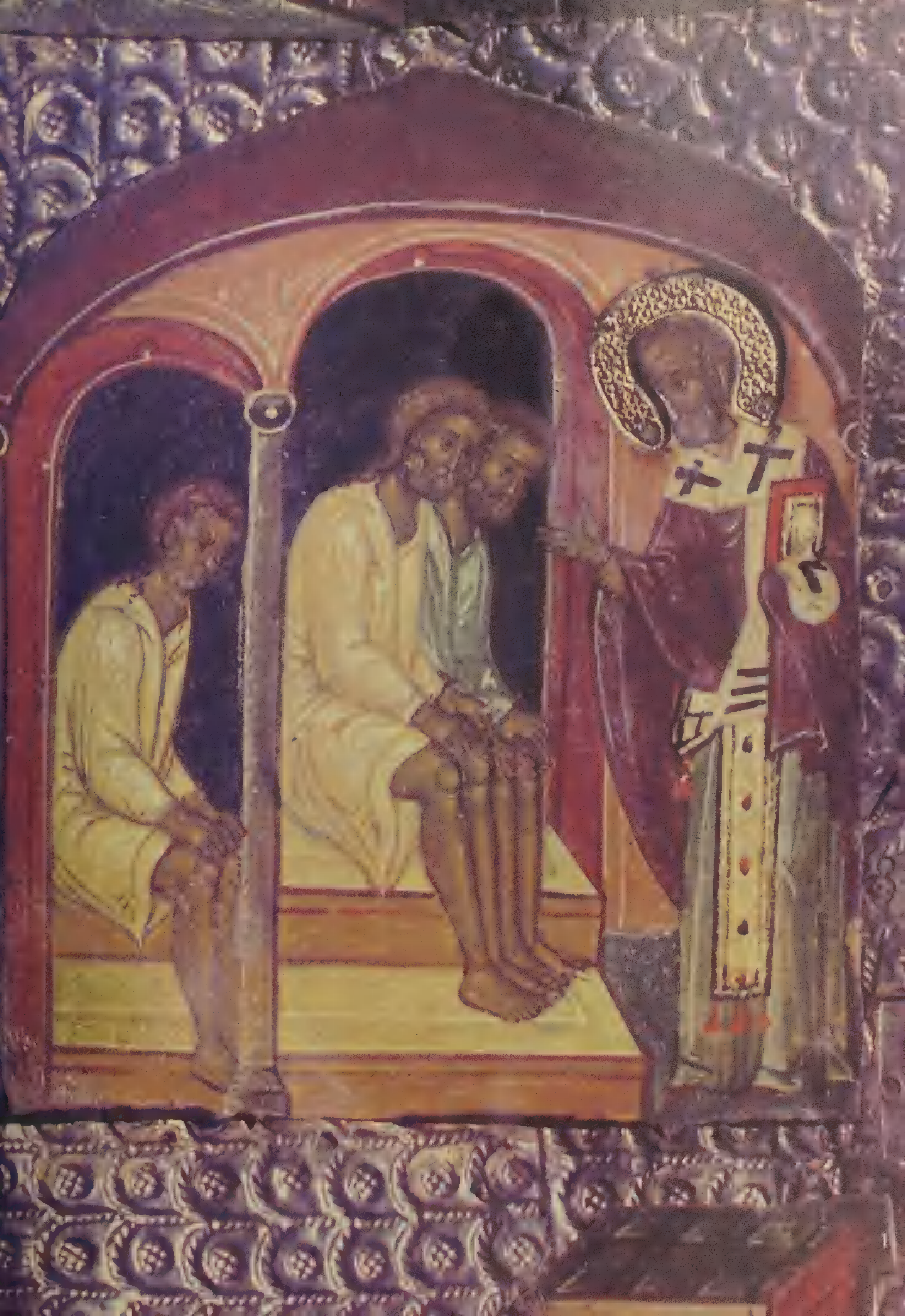

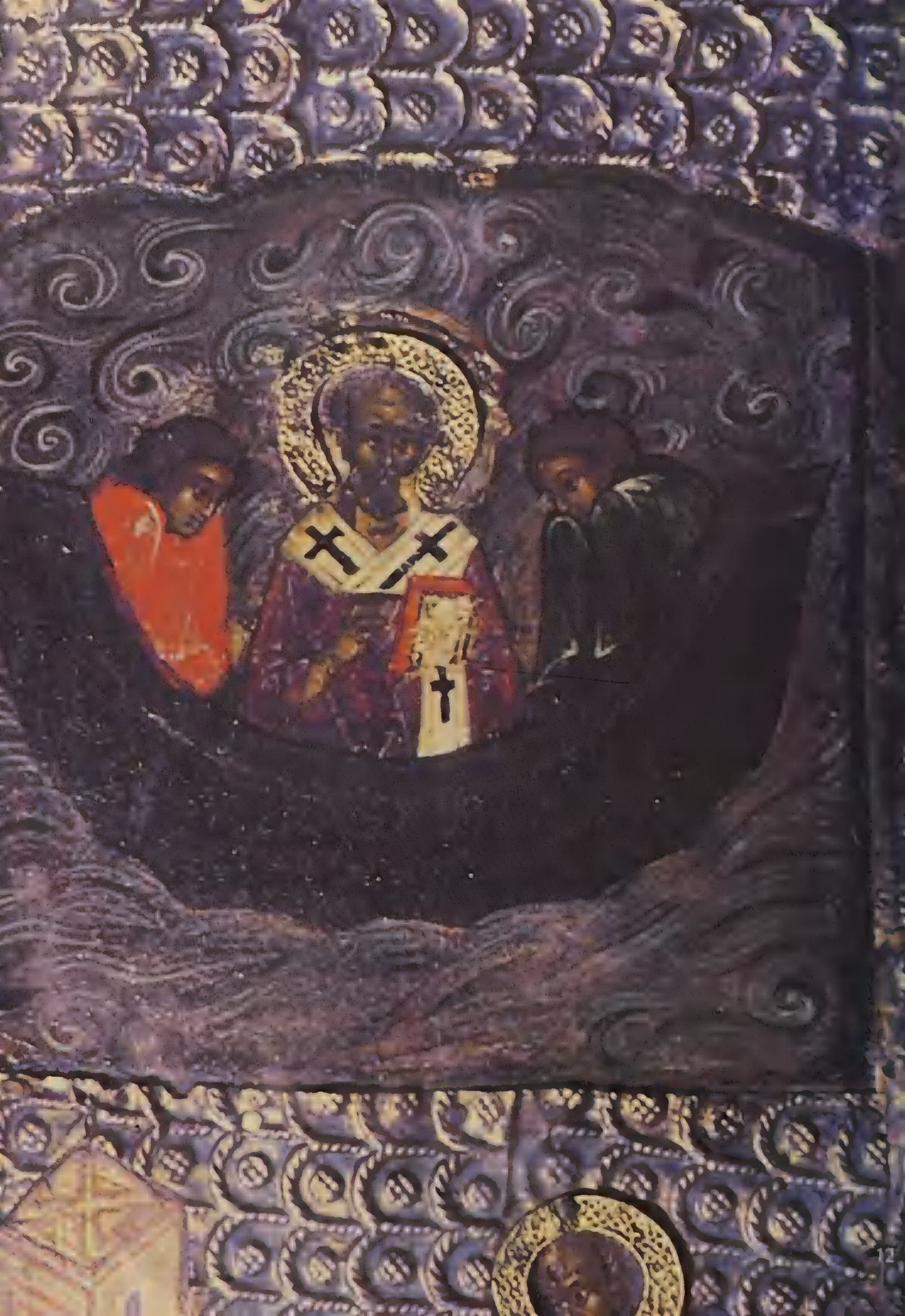
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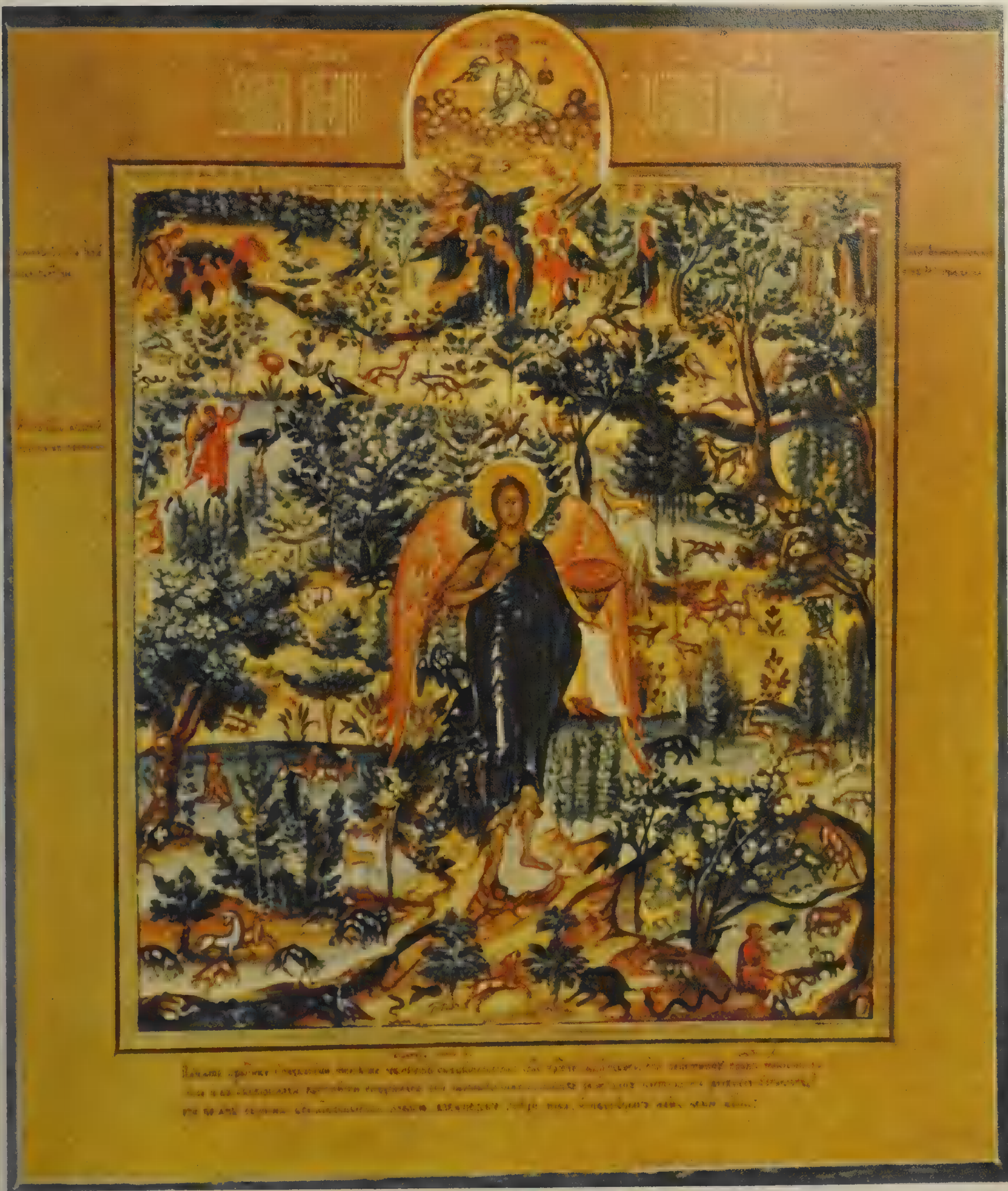

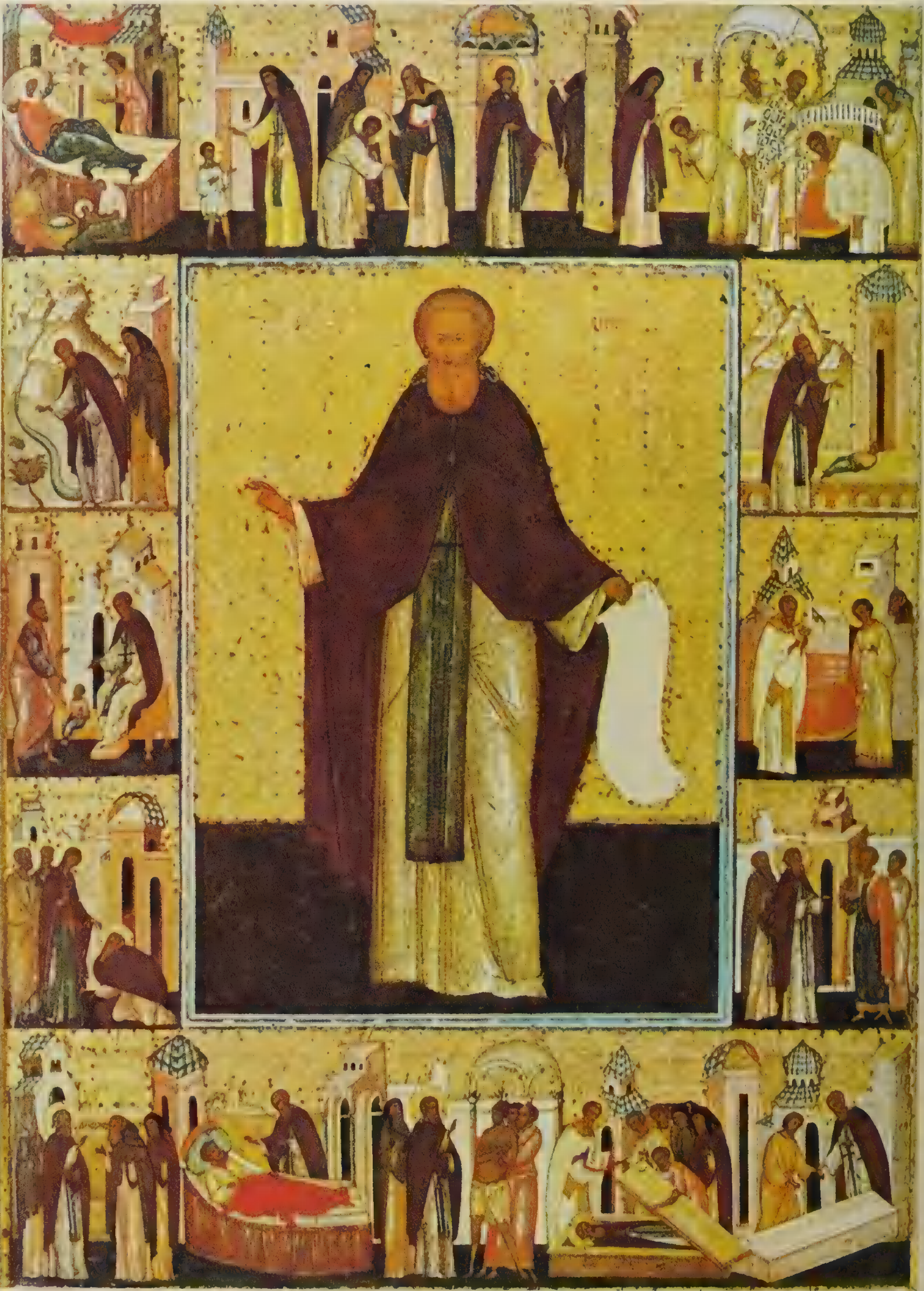

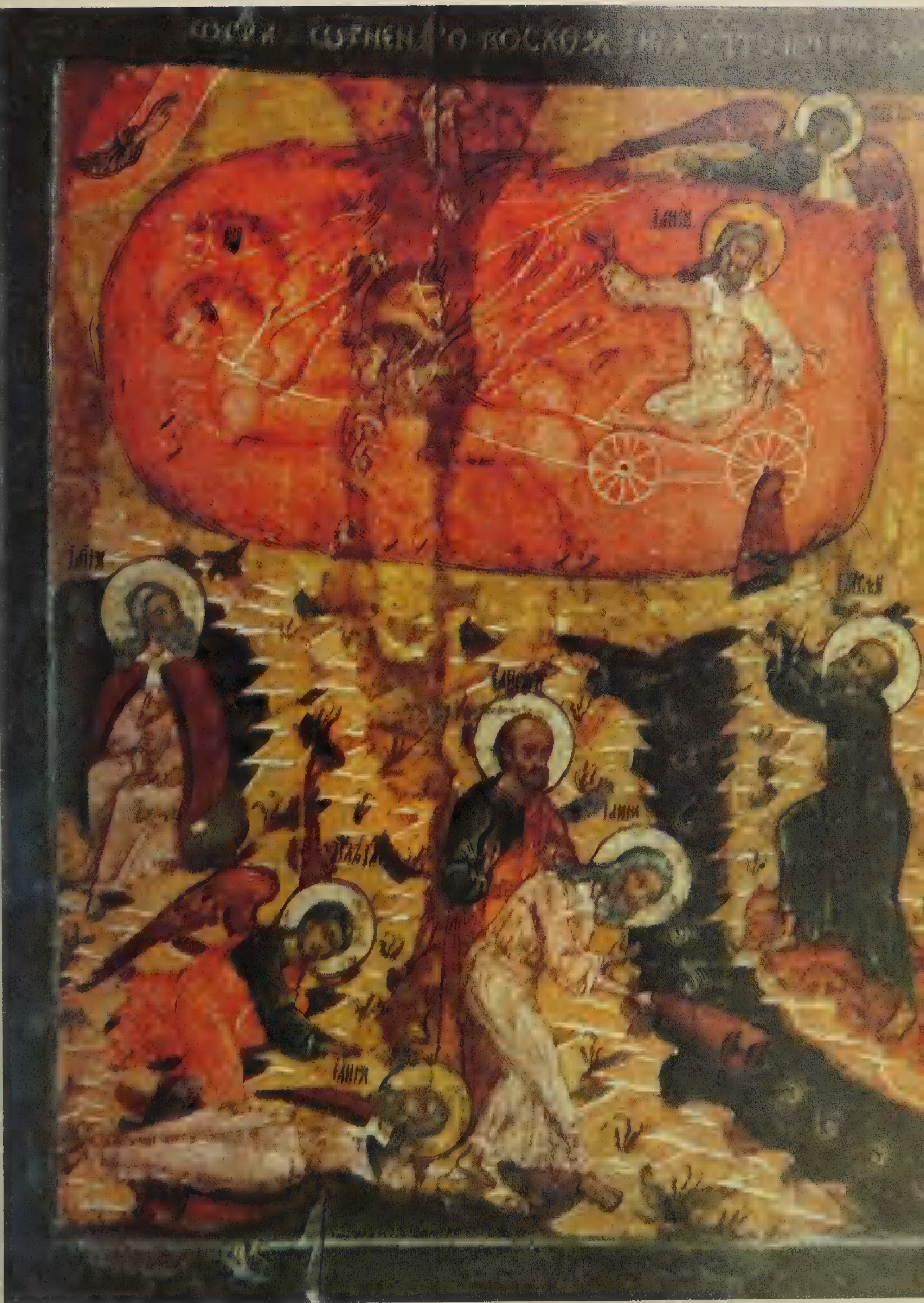

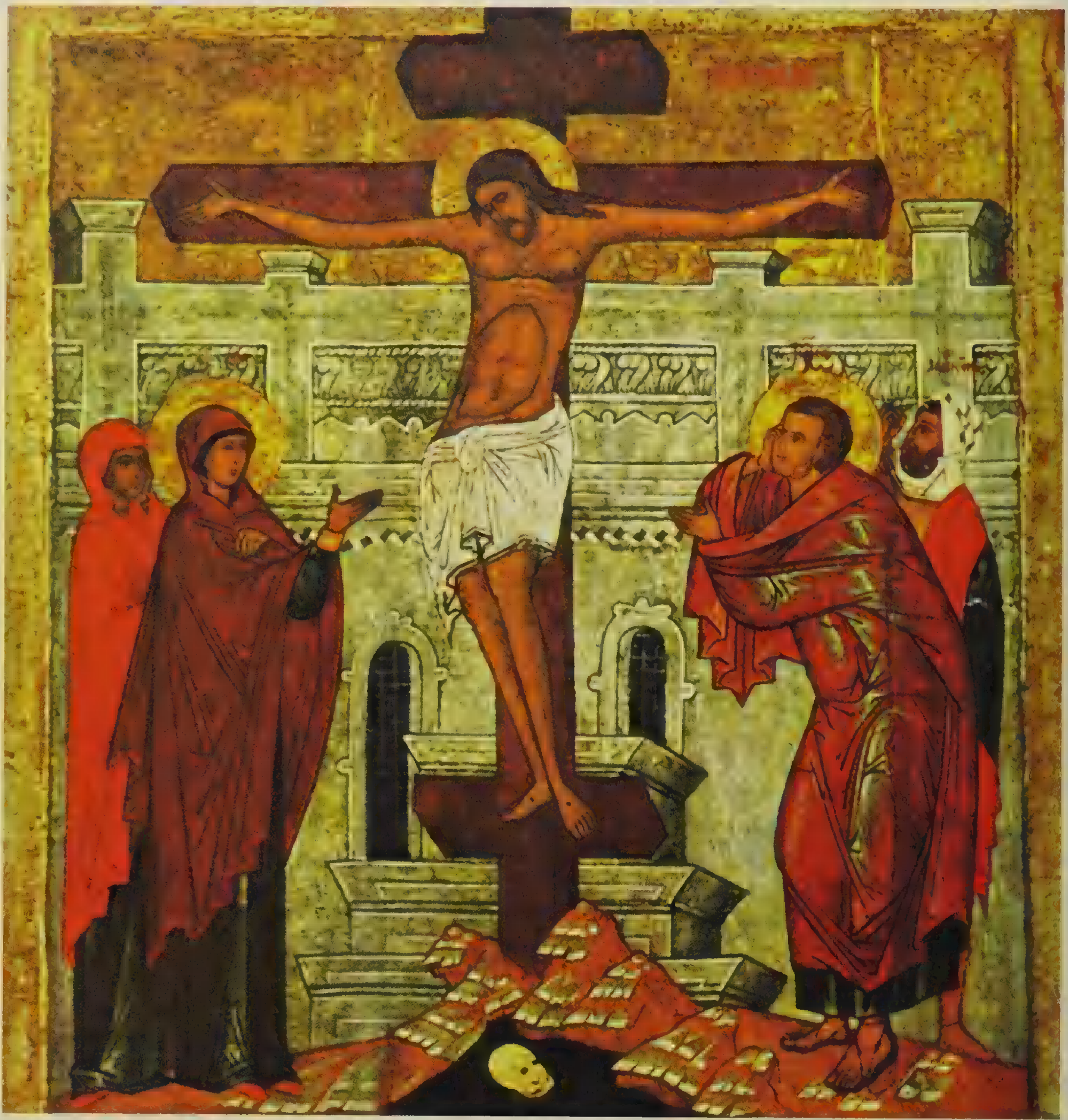

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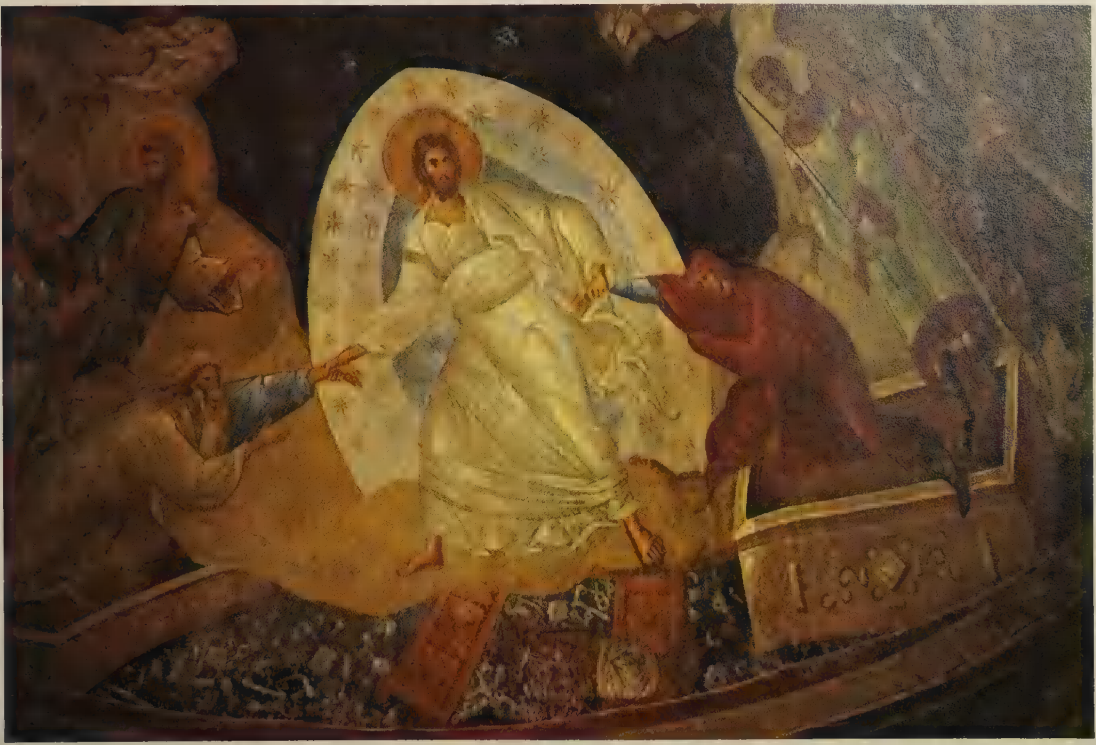

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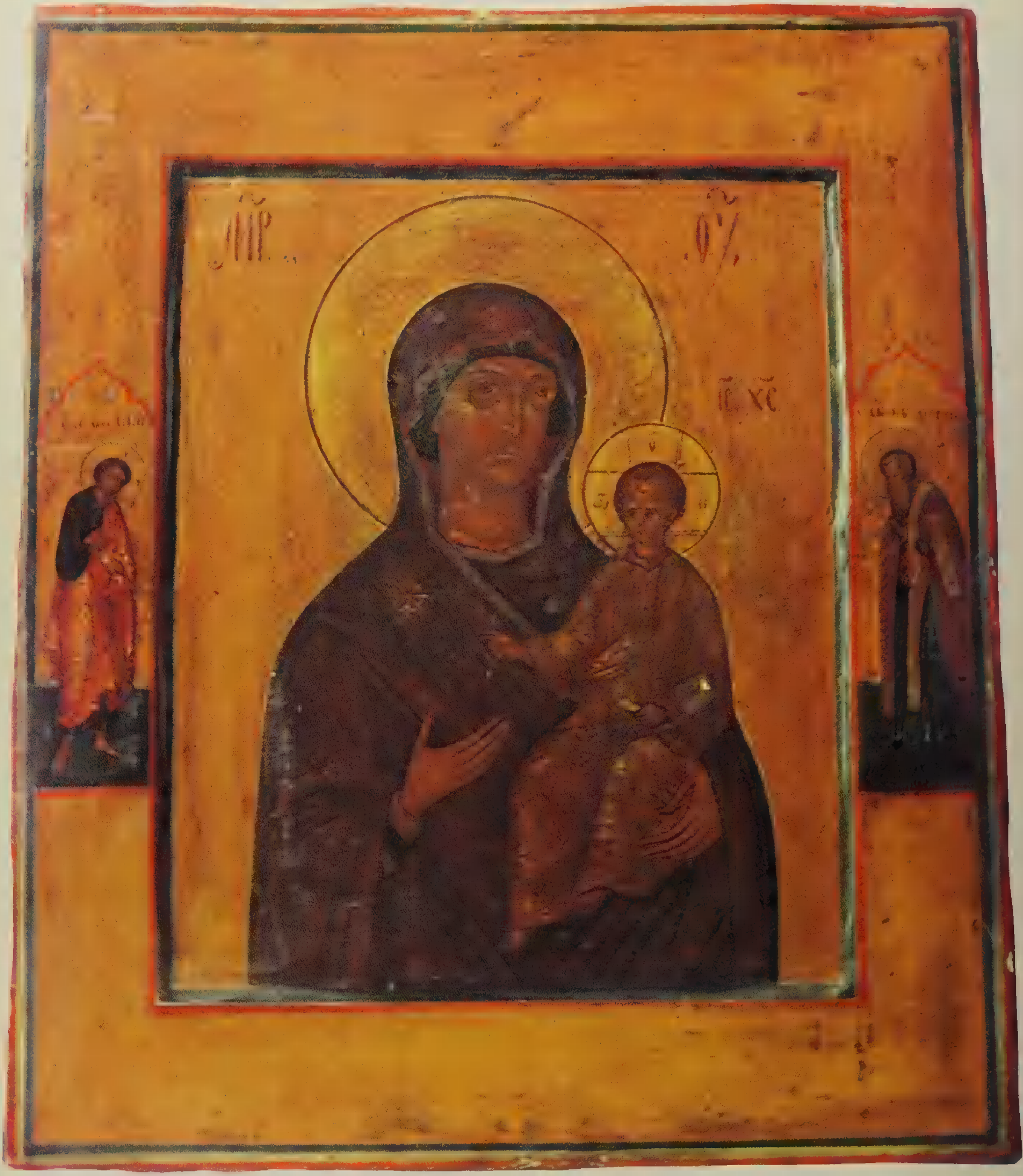

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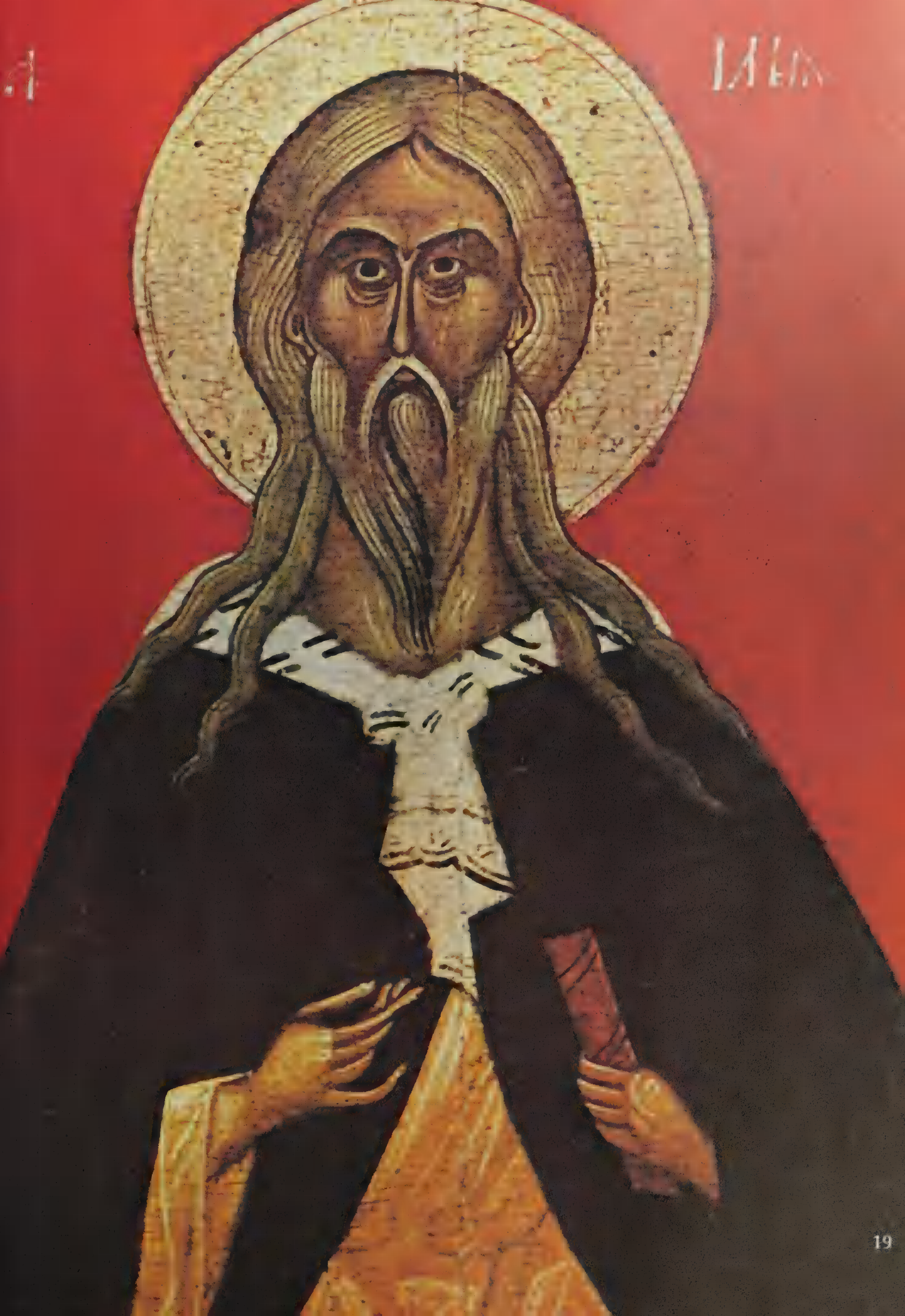

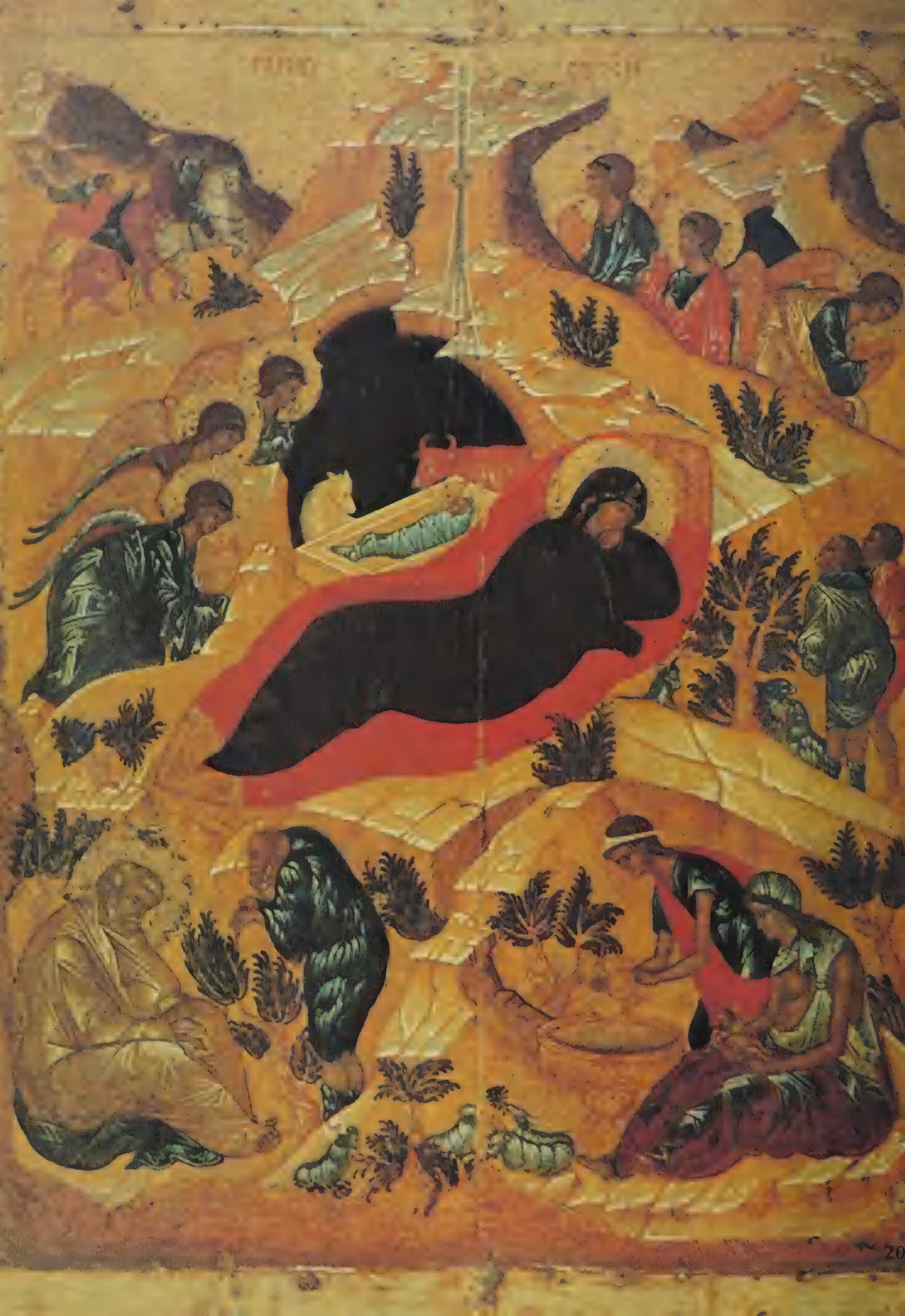

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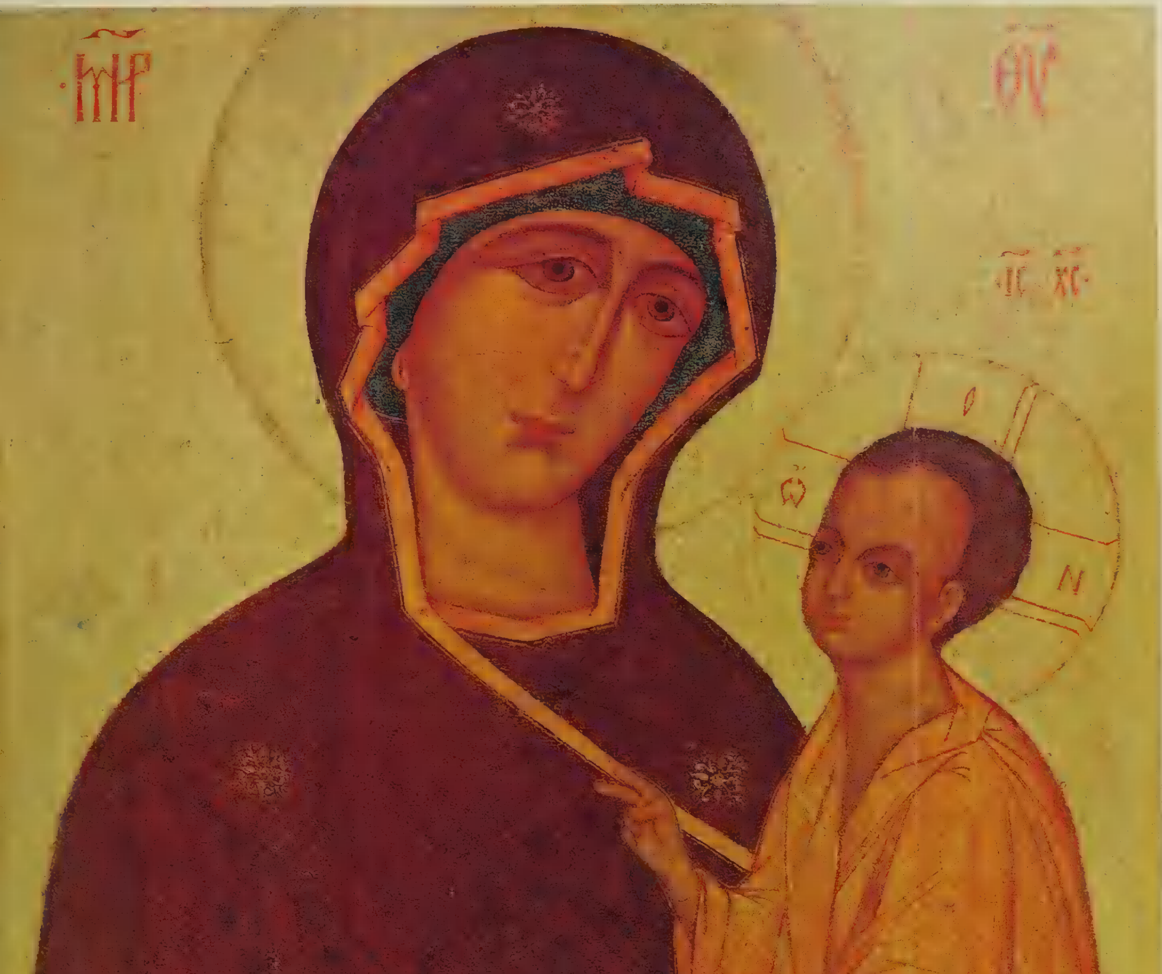
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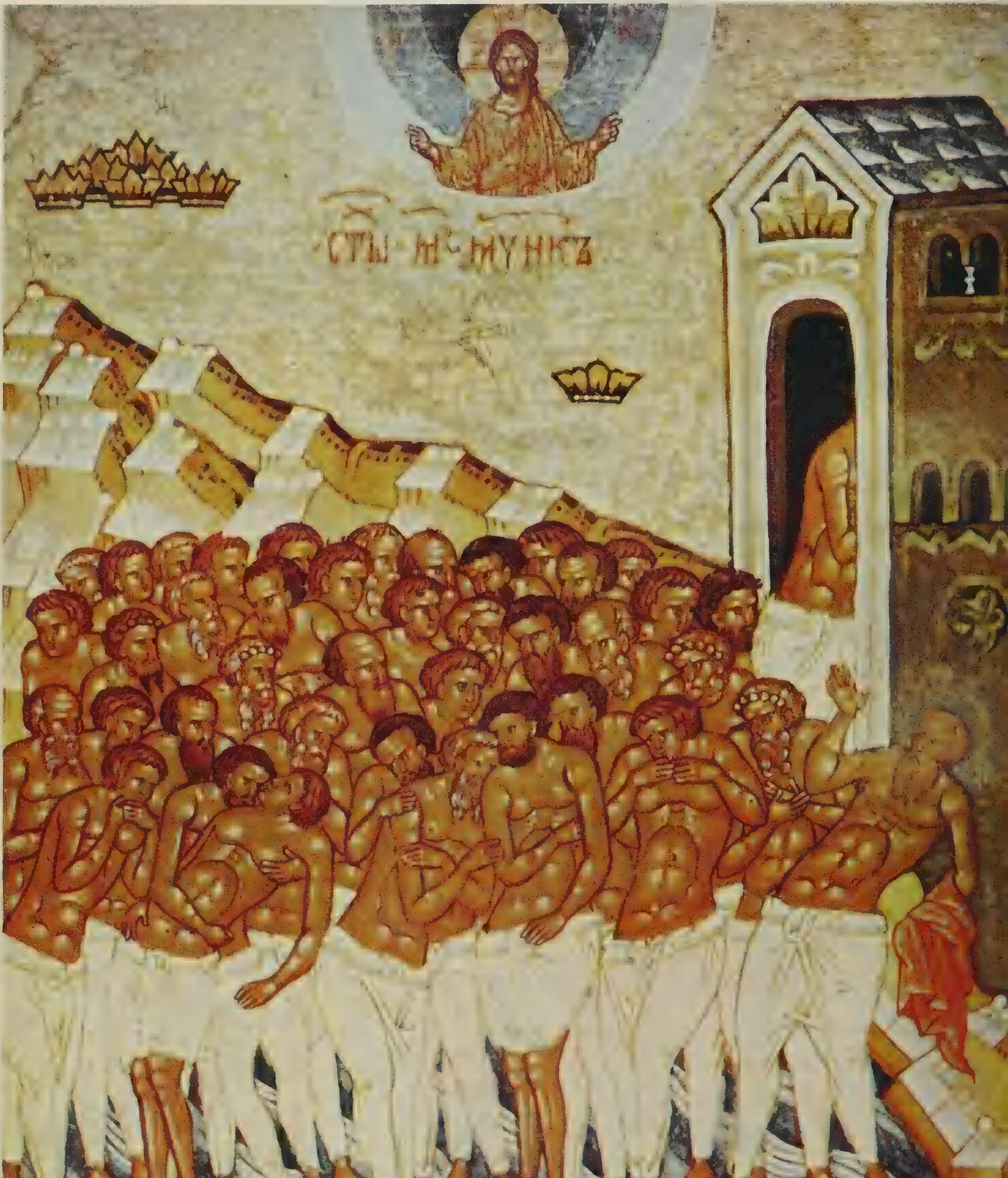
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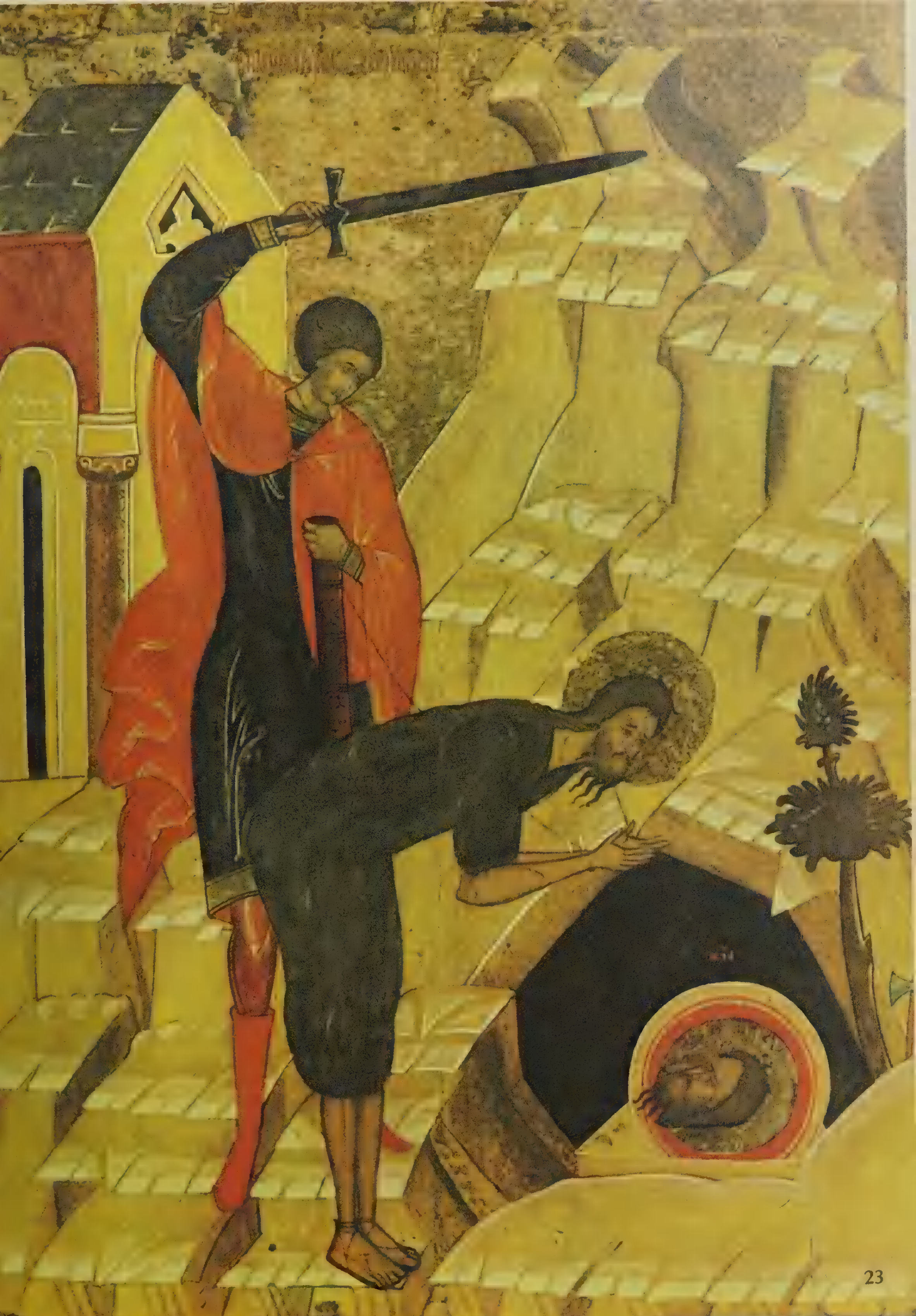

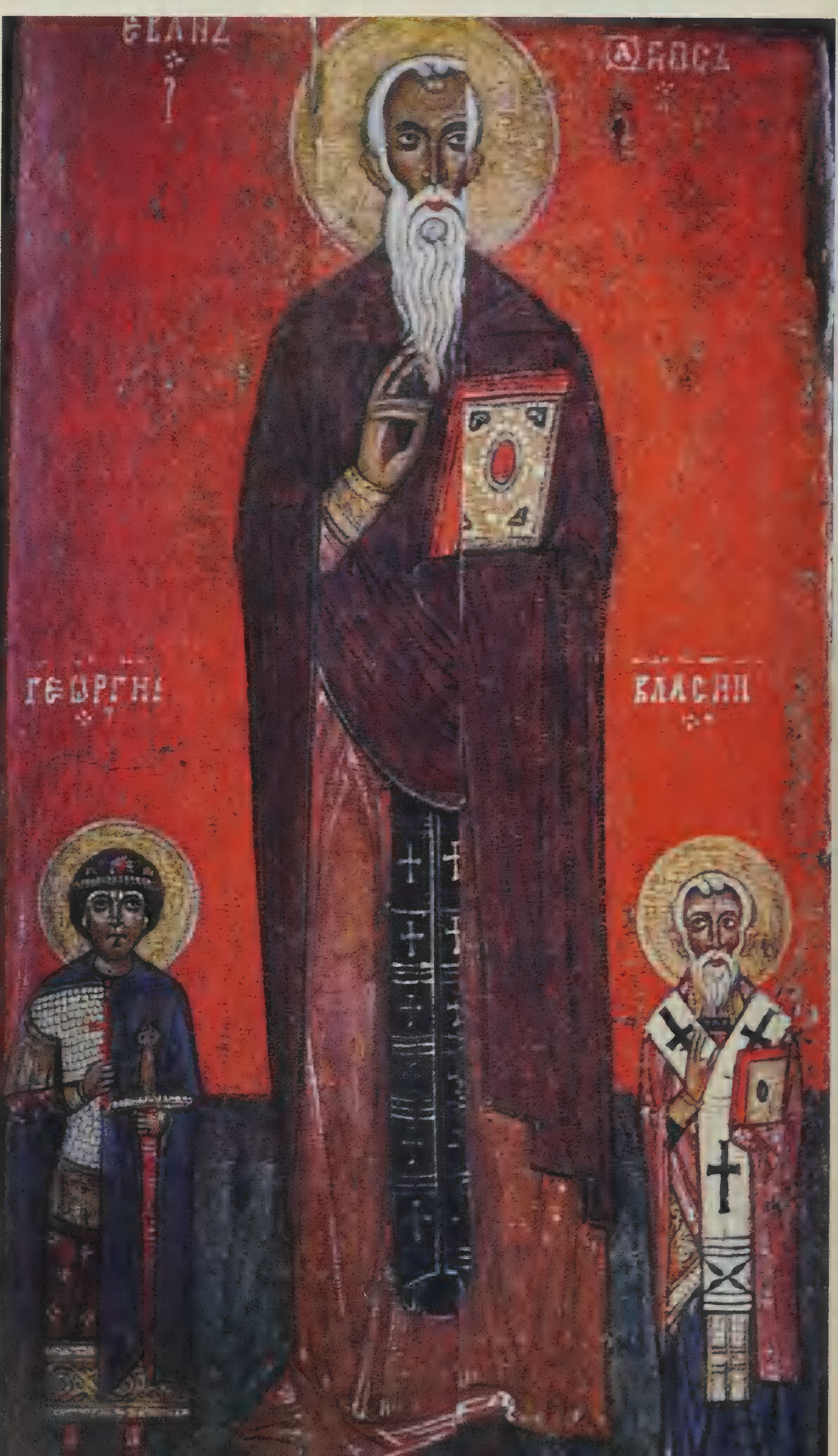
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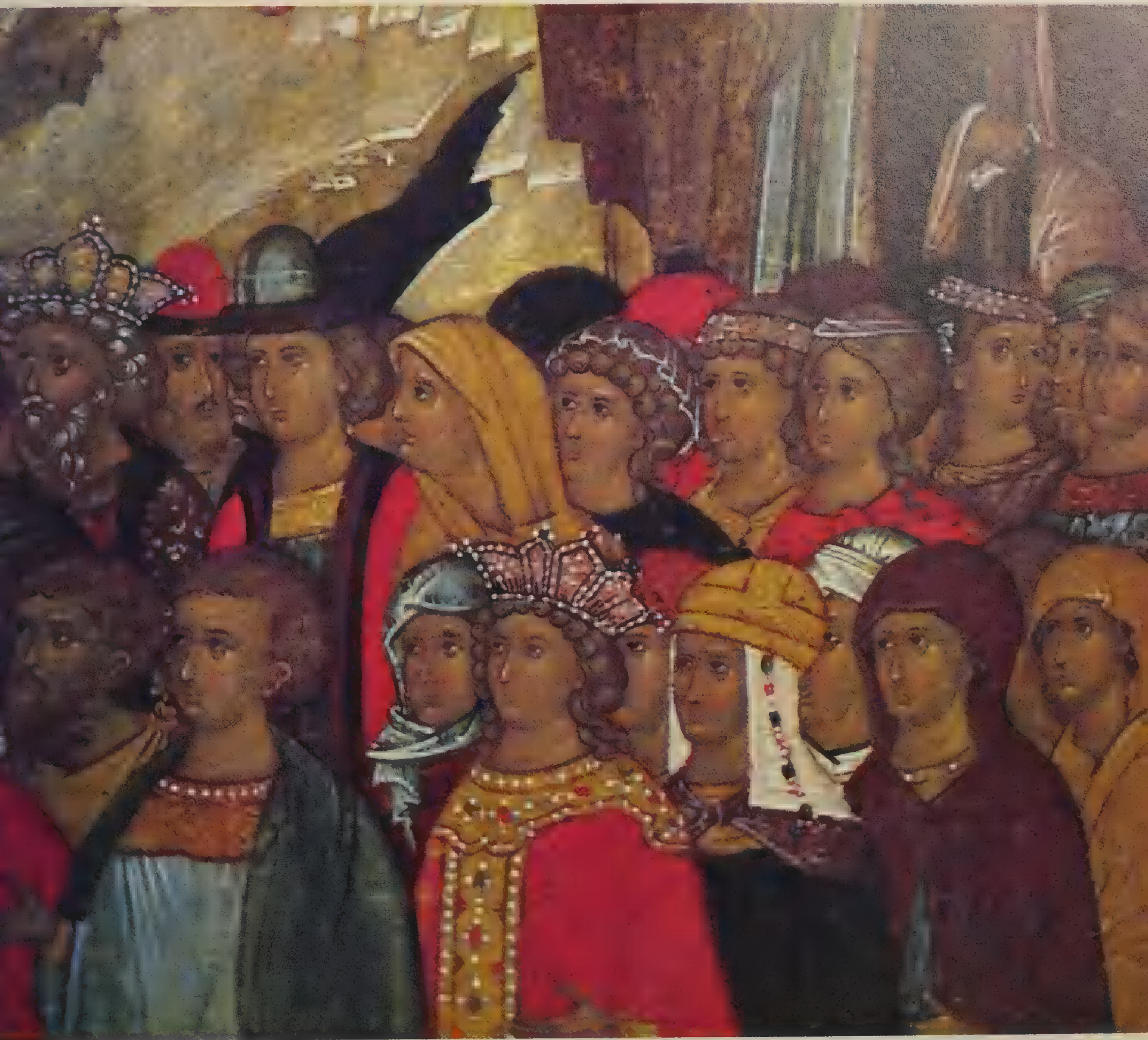

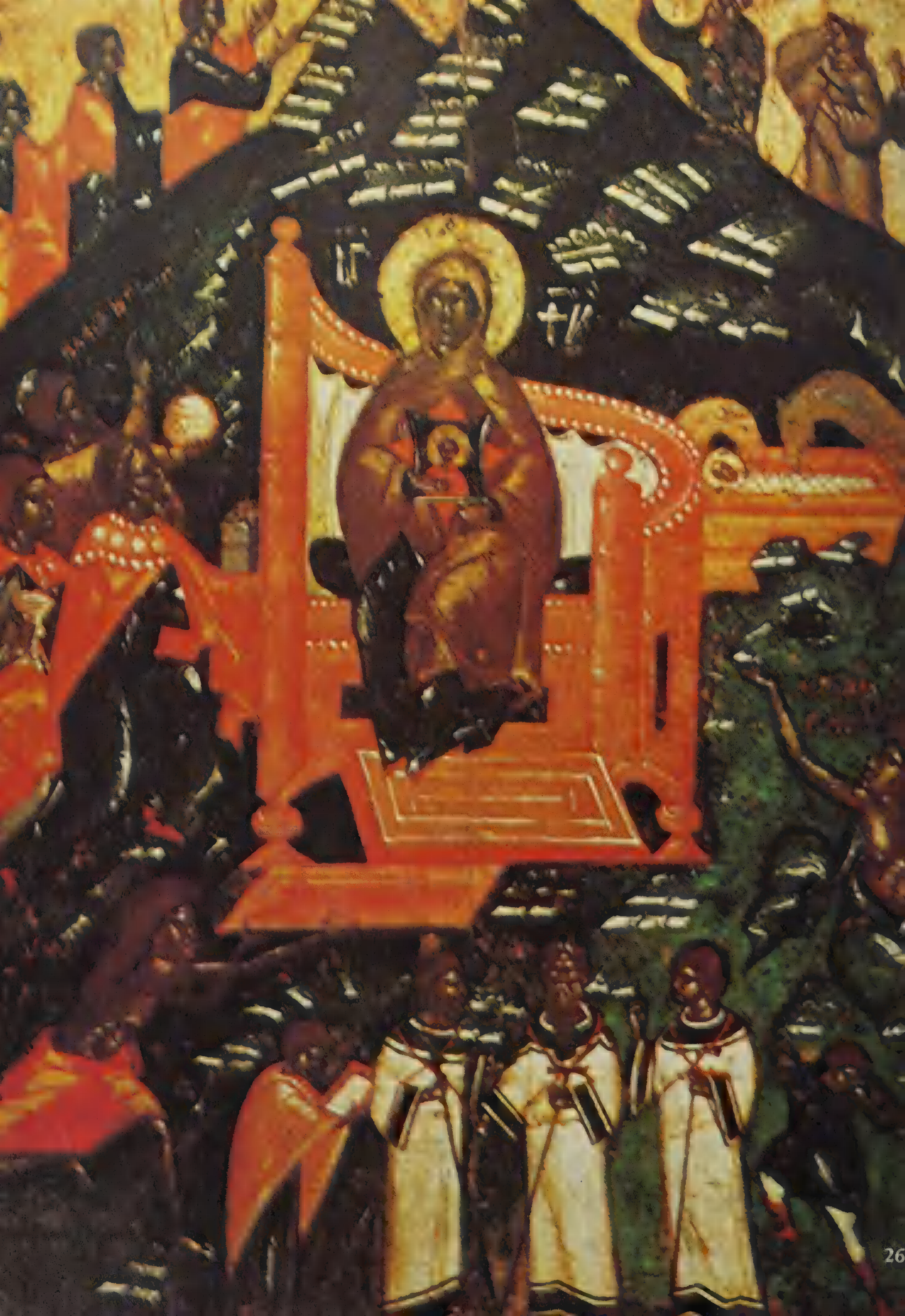

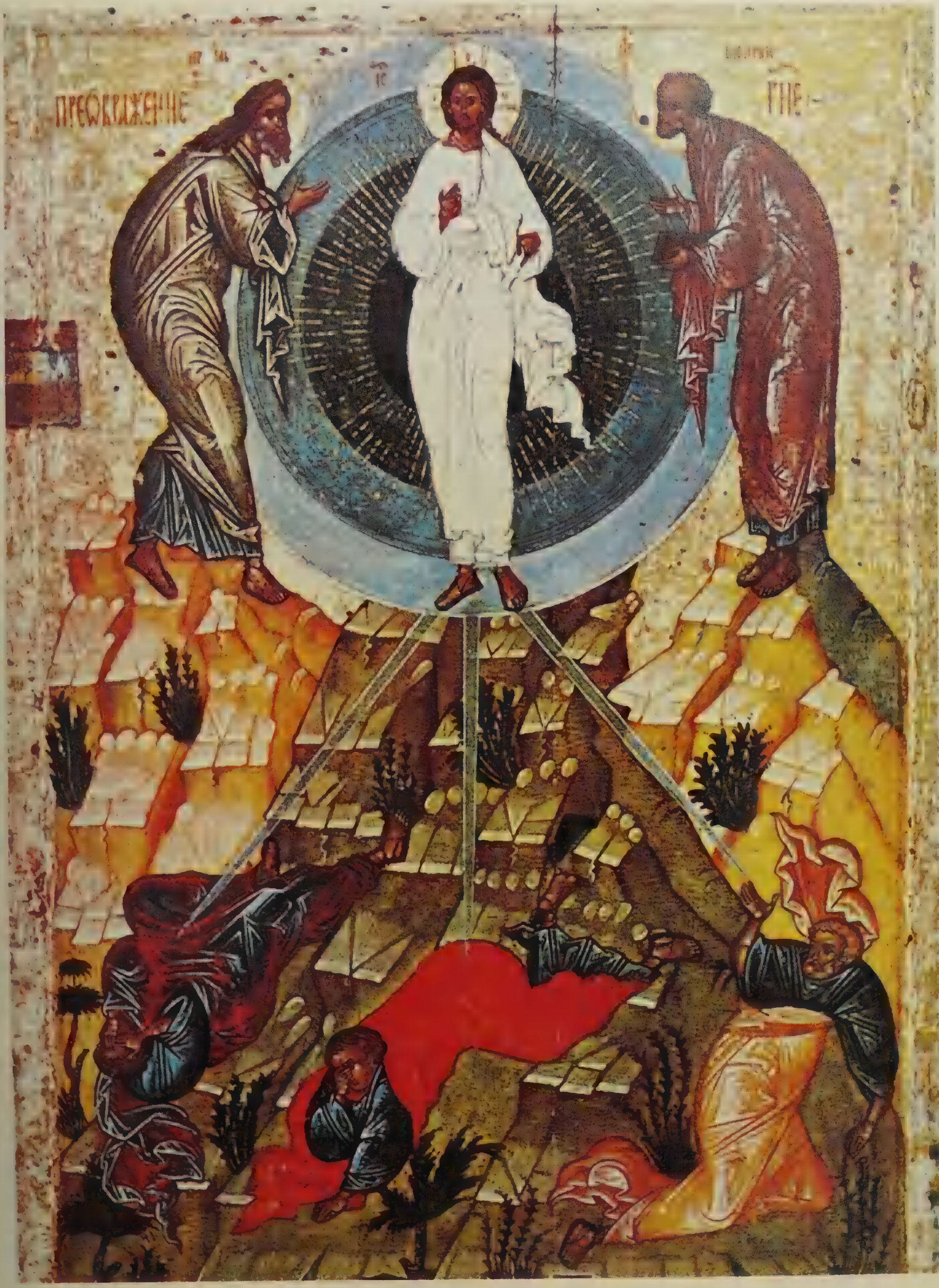
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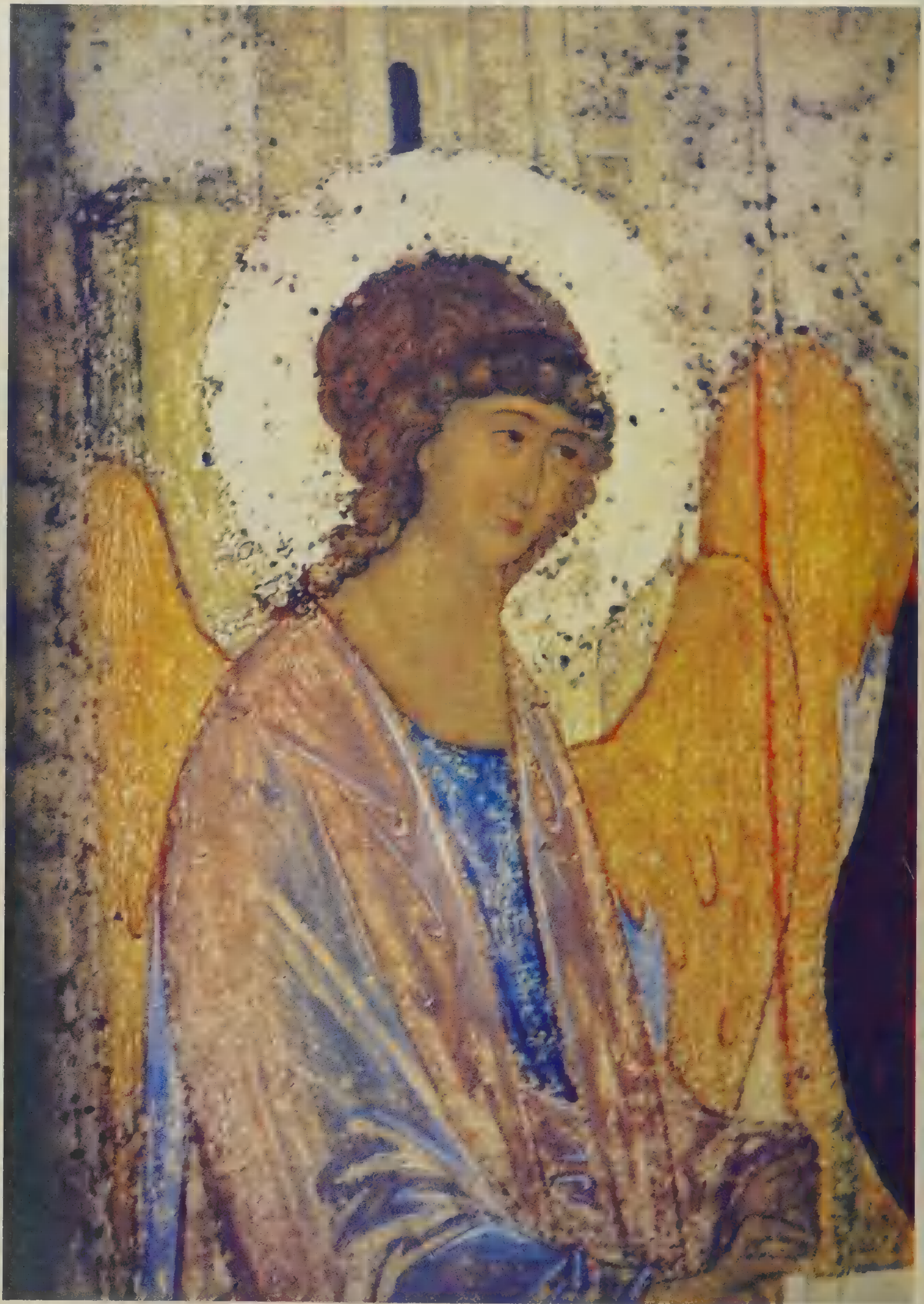

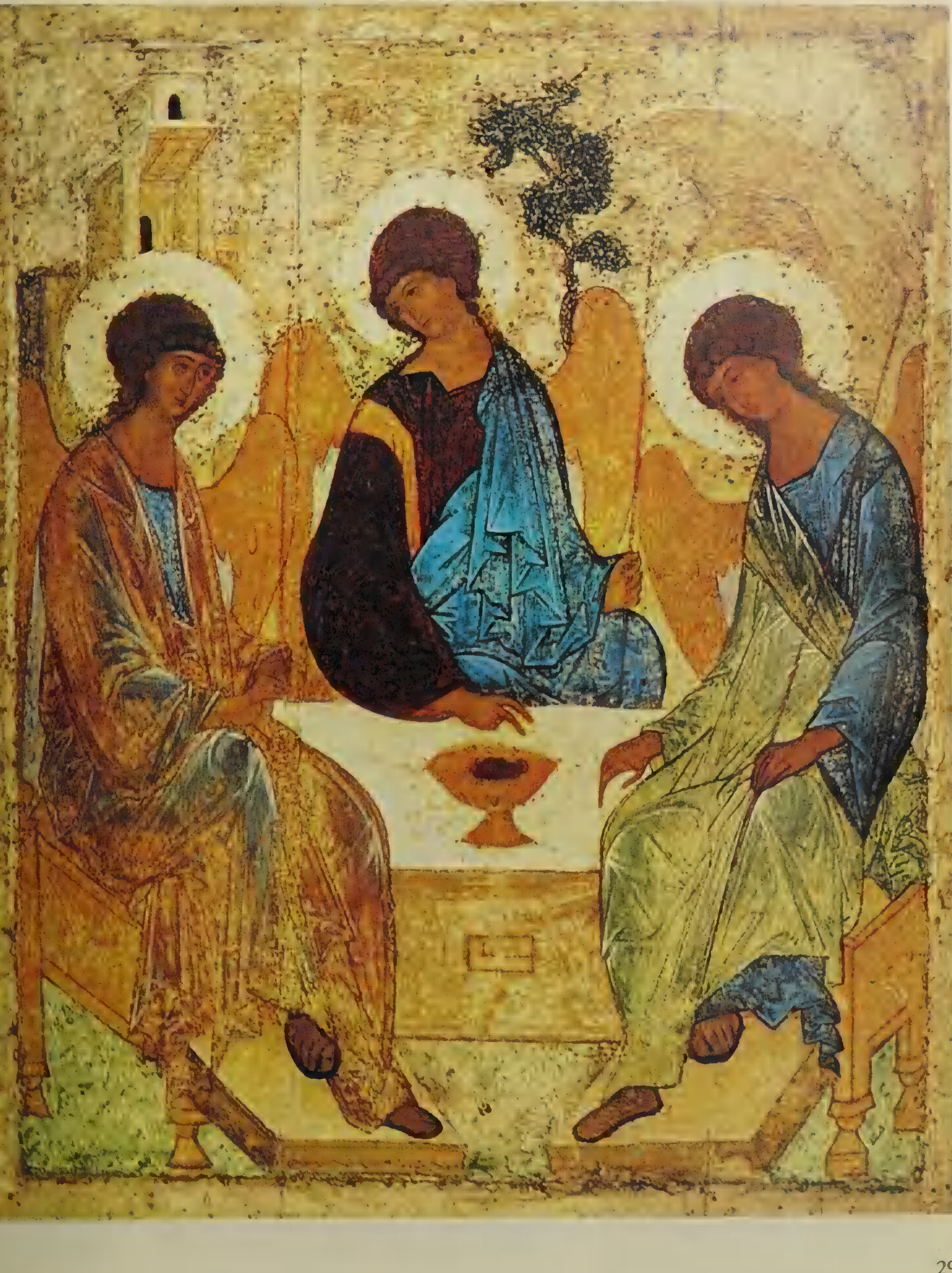

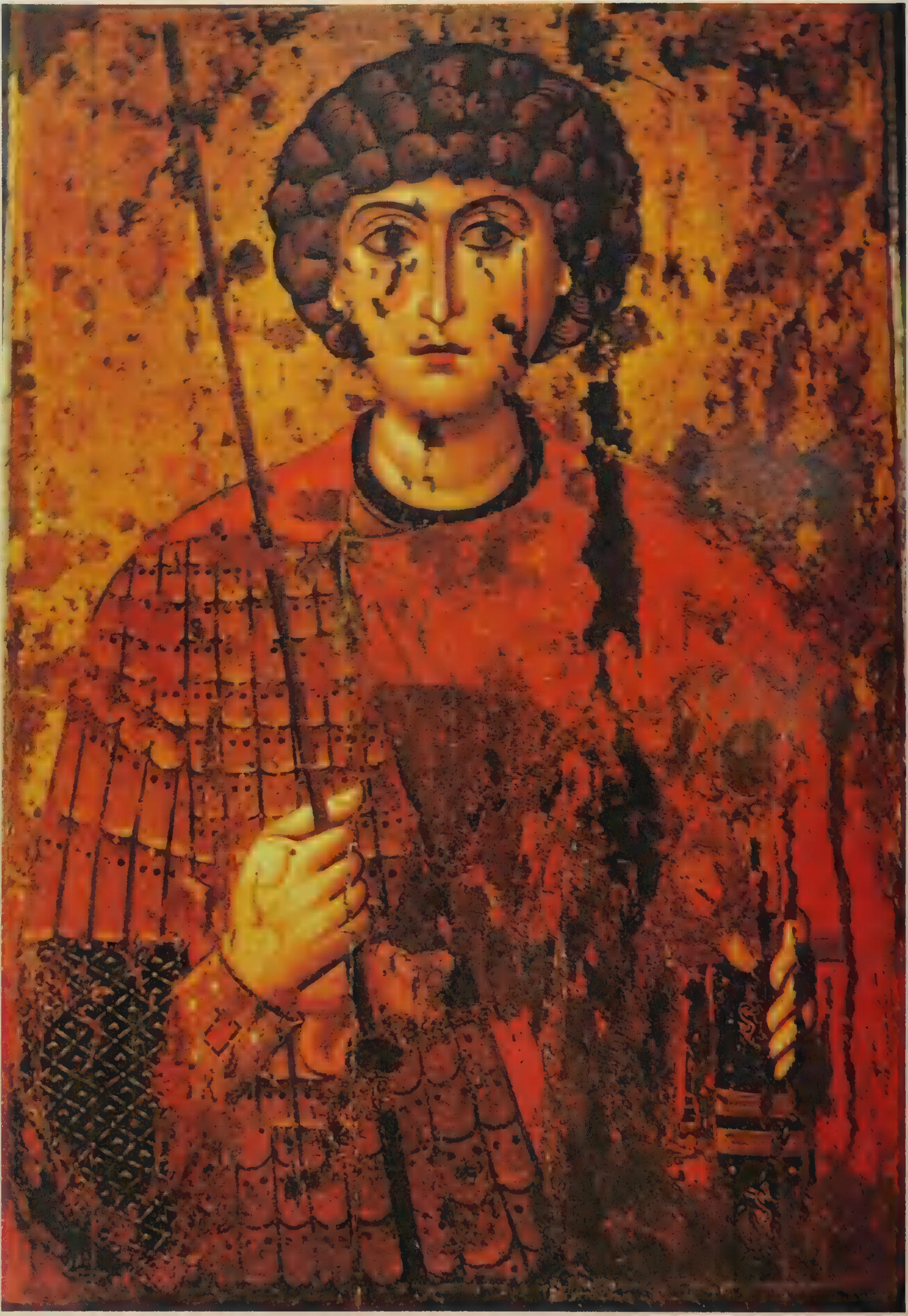

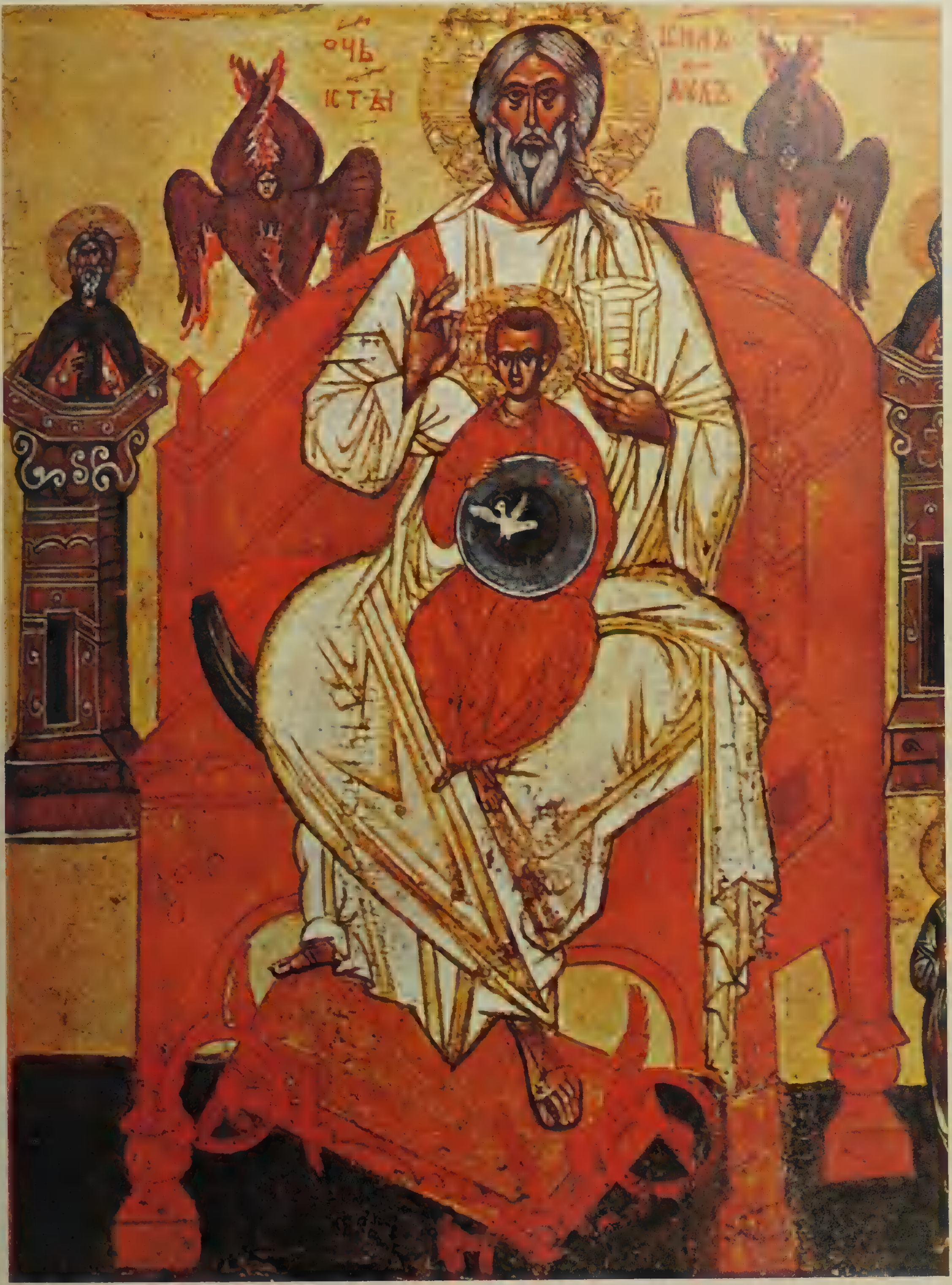
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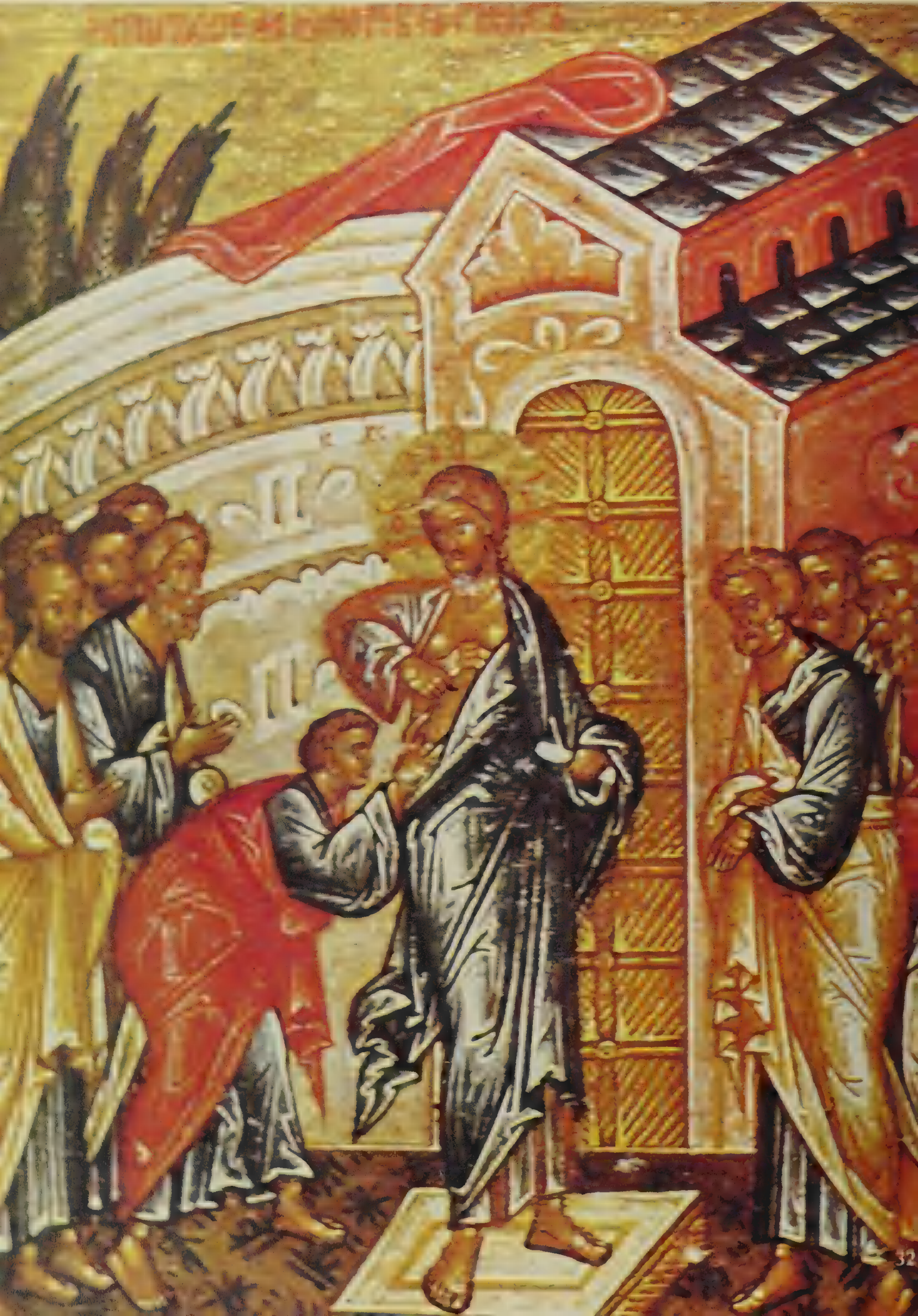

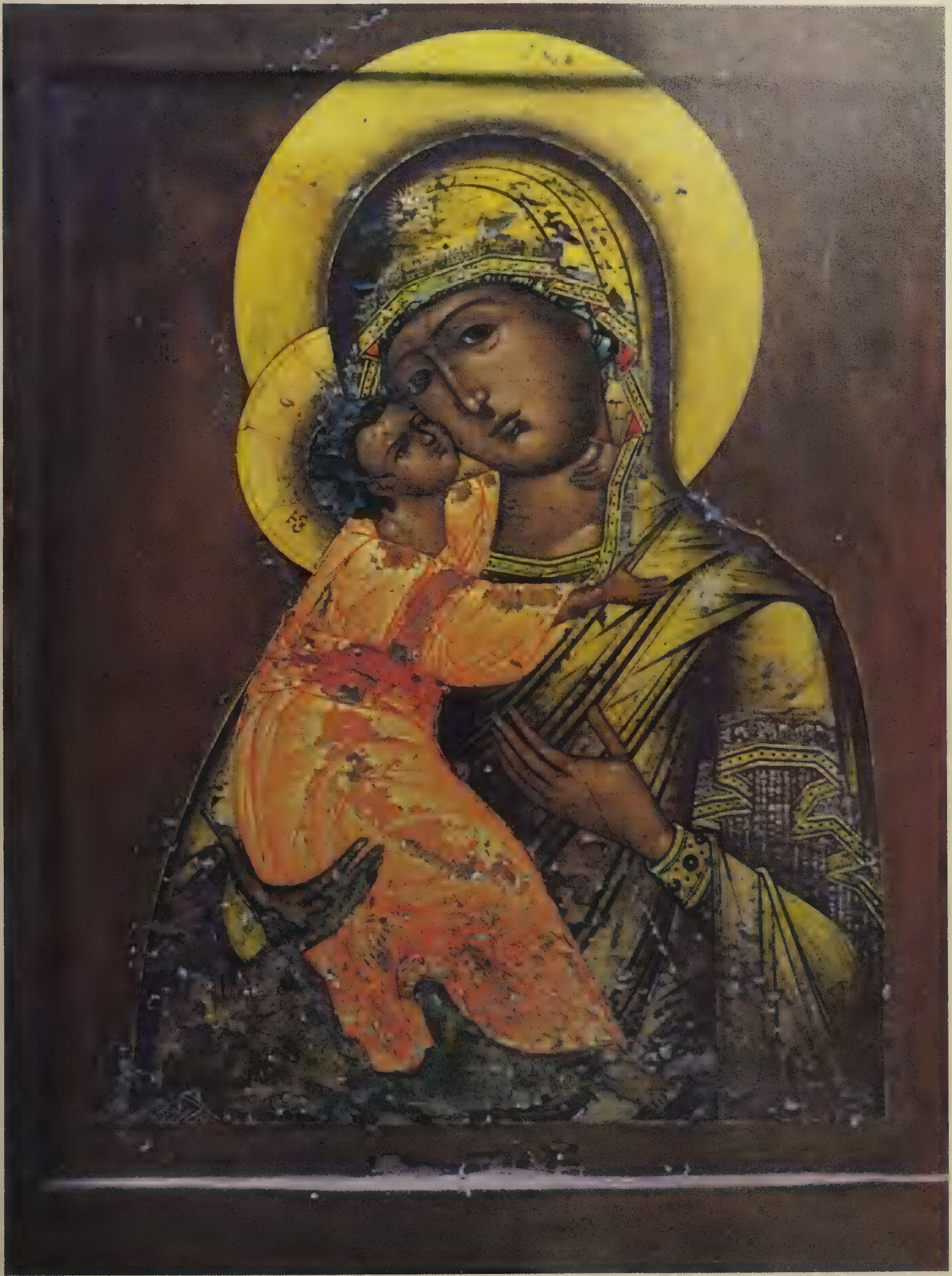

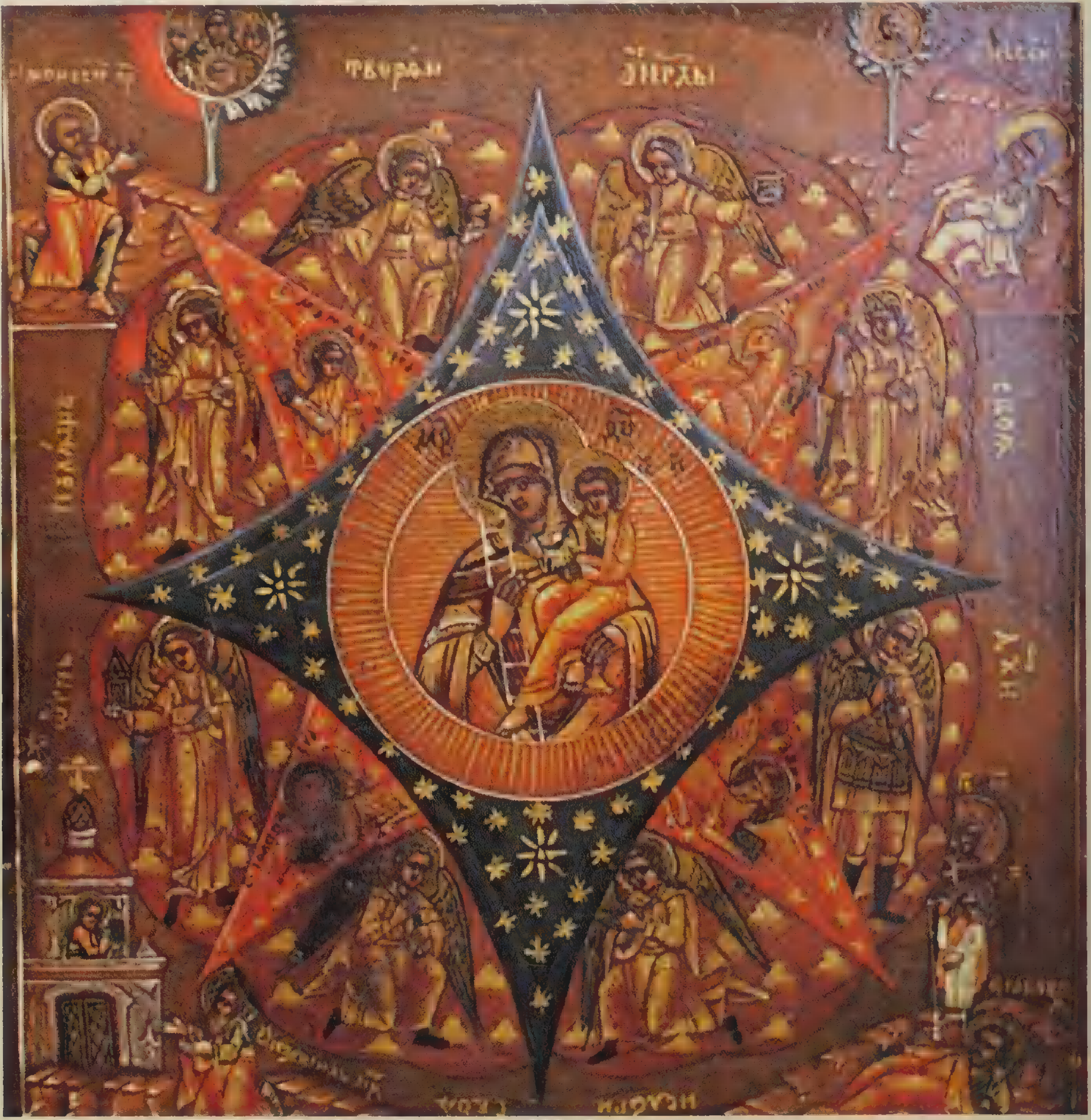

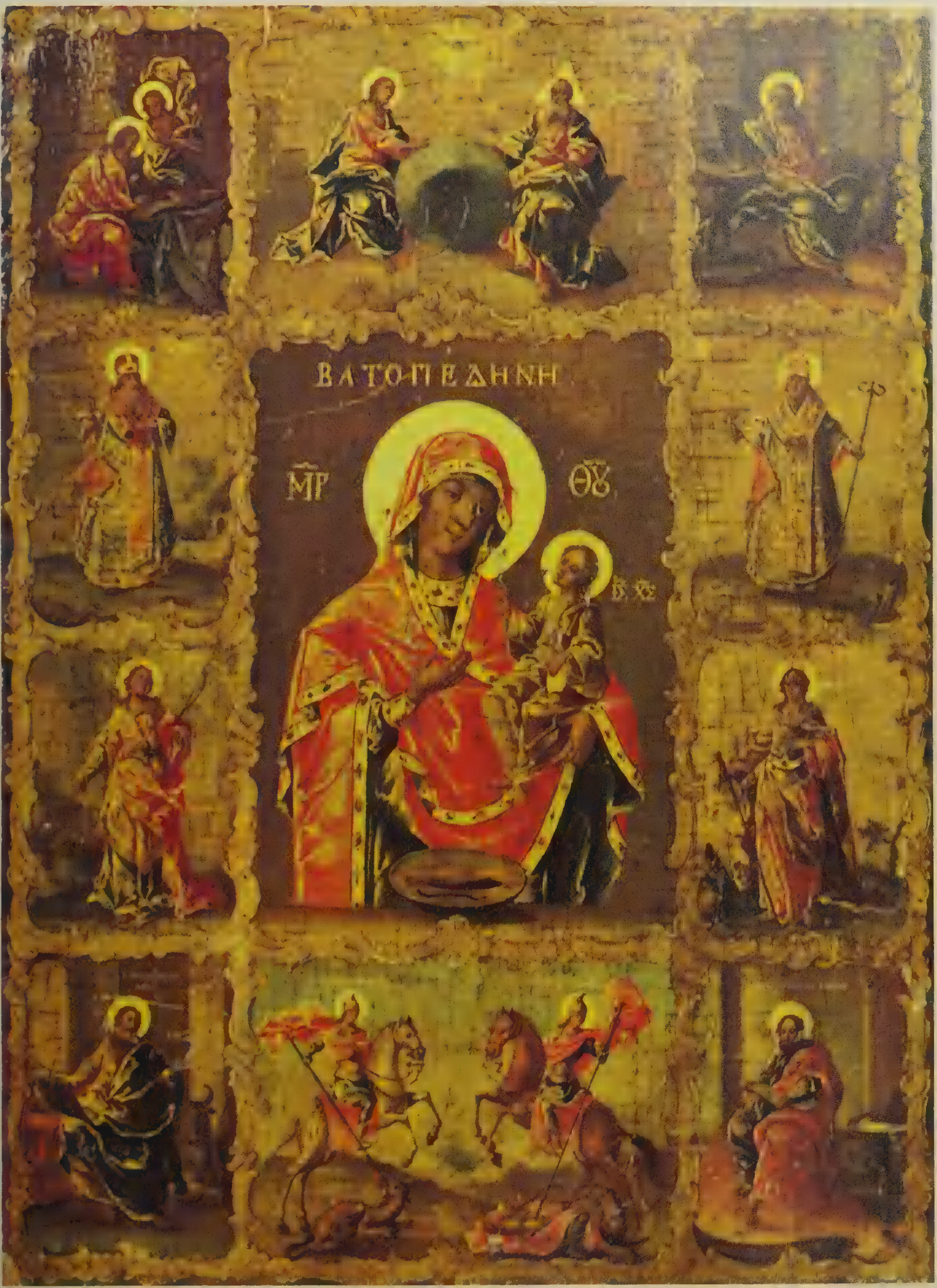
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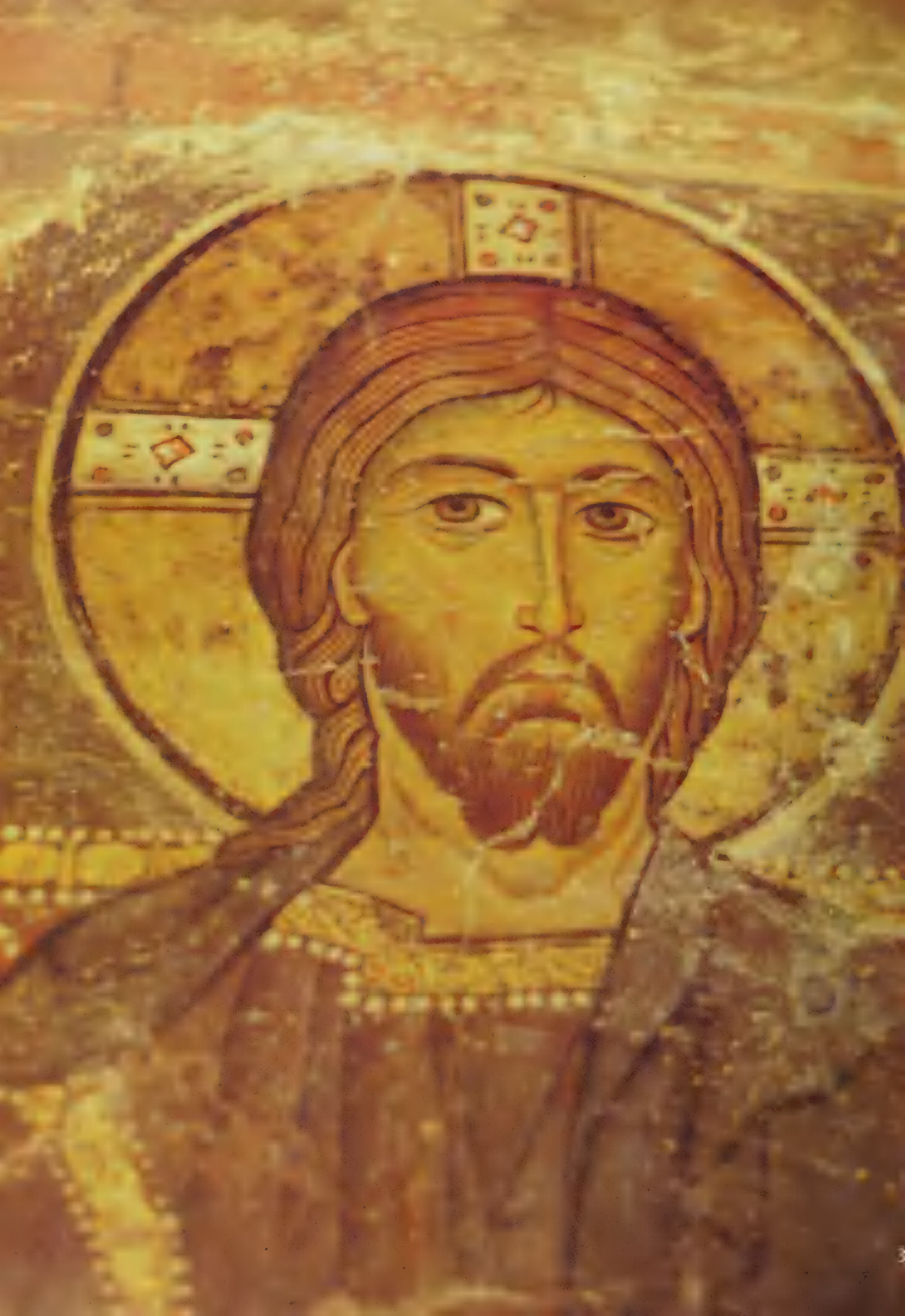

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"...you saw no shape on that day." (Deut. 4:15) Oh what wisdom on the part of the lawgiver! How can we make an image of the invisible One? How can we represent the features of that which is not like anything else? How can we represent that which has no quantity, no height, no limits? What form are we going to assign to that which is without form? What then do we do with the mystery?

If you understood the incorporeal One became man for you, then it would be evident that you can make his human image.

Since the invisible One became visible by taking on flesh, you can fashion the image of him whom you saw. Since He who has neither body, nor form nor quantity nor quality, who goes beyond all grandeur by the excellence of his nature, He, being of divine nature, took on the condition of a slave and reduced himself to quantity and to quality by clothing himself in human features. Therefore, paint on wood and present for contemplation Him who desired to become visible.

(St. John of Damascus:
"On the Divine Images"
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